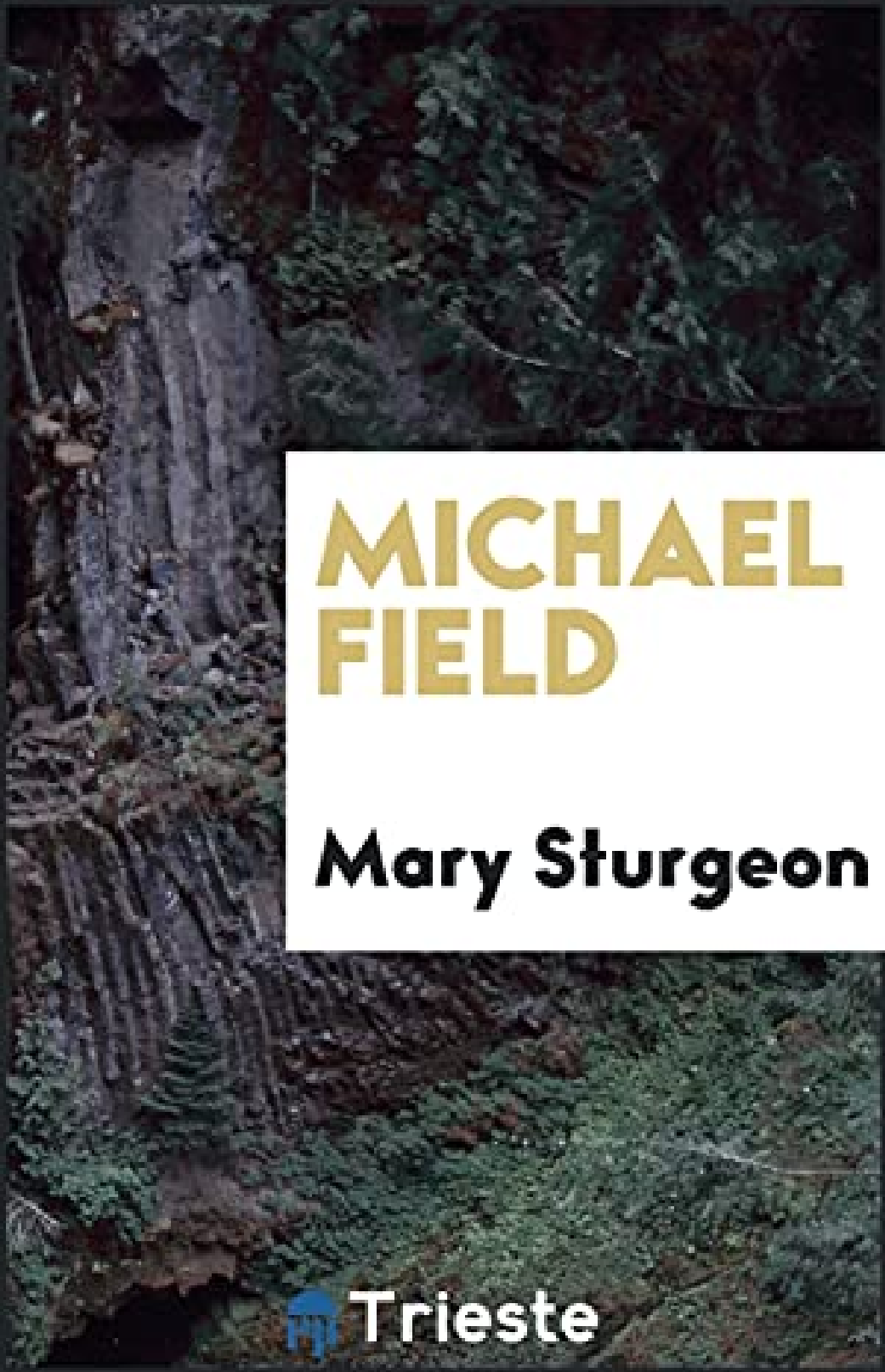


MICHAEL FIELD

Mary Sturgeon

Trieste

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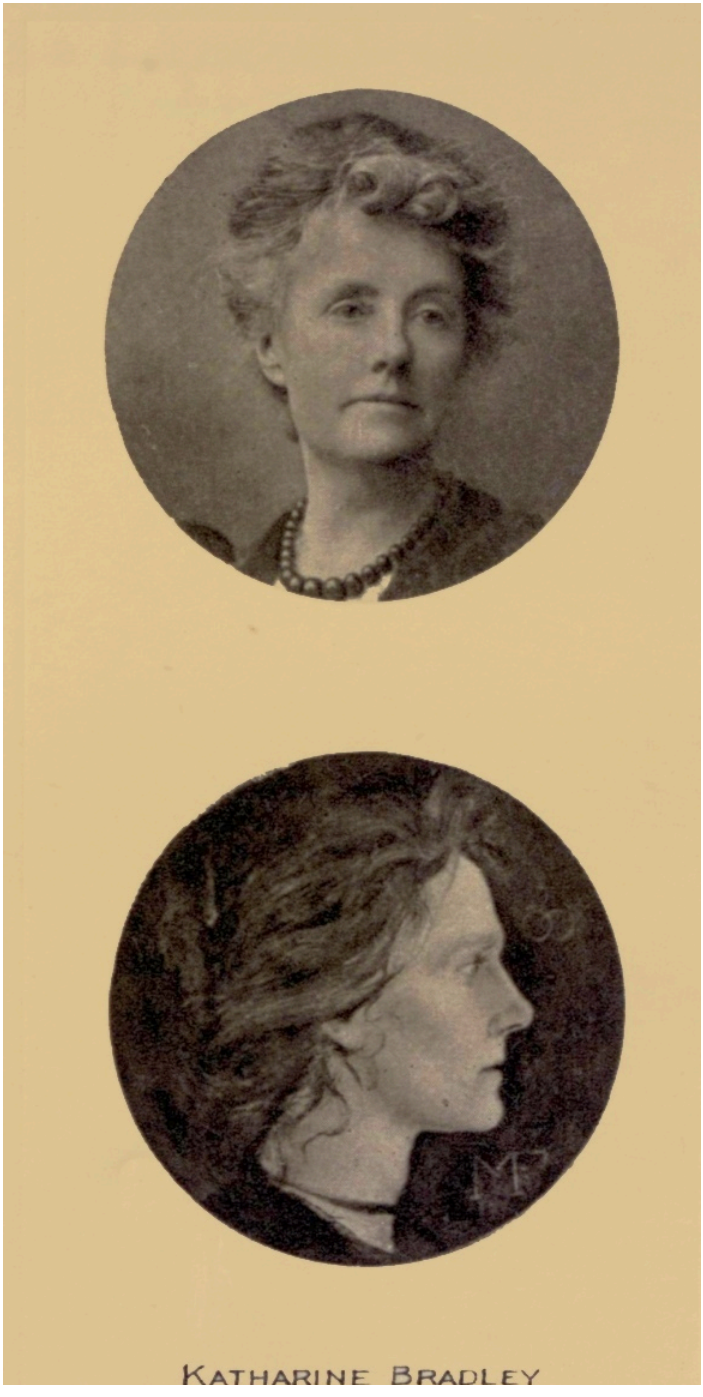
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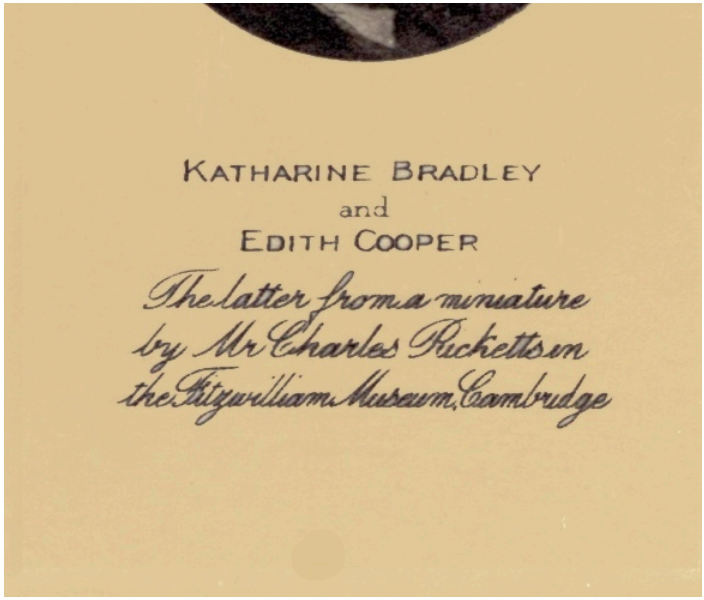
MICHAEL FIELD

BY MARY STURGEON

" *... the two friends ...*
Who sought perfection and achieved far more."
Gordon Bottomley



KATHARINE BRADLEY



Katharine Bradley
and
Edith Cooper
The latter from a miniature
by Mr Charles Ricketts in
the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

MICHAEL FIELD

BY MARY STURGEON

AUTHOR OF "STUDIES OF CONTEMPORARY POETS" "WESTMINSTER ABBEY" ETC.



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PREFACE

SOME years ago the writer of this book discovered to herself the work of Michael Field, with fresh delight at every step of her adventure through the lyrics, the tragedies, and later devotional poems. But she was amazed to find that no one seemed to have heard about this large body of fine poetry; and she longed to spread the news, even before the further knowledge was gained that the life

of Michael Field had itself been epical in romance and heroism. Then the theme was irresistible.

But although it has been a joy to try to retrieve something of this life and work from the limbo into which it appeared to be slipping, the matter may wear anything but a joyful aspect to all the long-suffering ones who were ruthlessly laid under tribute. The author remembers guiltily the many friends of the poets whom she has harried, and kindly library staffs (in particular at the Bodleian) who gave generous and patient help. To each one she offers sincere gratitude; and though it is impossible to name them all, she desires especially to record her debt to Mr Sturge Moore and Miss Fortey; Father Vincent McNabb, Mrs Berenson, and Mr Charles Ricketts; Dr Grenfell, Sir Herbert Warren, and Mr and Mrs Algernon Warren; Miss S. J. Tanner, Mr Havelock Ellis and Miss Louie Ellis; the Misses Sturge; Professor F. Brooks and the Rev. C. L. Bradley; Professor and Mrs William Rothenstein; Mr Gordon Bottomley and Mr Arthur Symons—;who will all understand her regret that this book is so unworthy a tribute to their friend and that the scheme of it, designed primarily to introduce the poetry of Michael Field, rendered impossible a fuller use of the material for a Life which they supplied.

To the courtesy of Mr Sydney C. Cockerell, the Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, the author owes the copy of Edith Cooper's portrait. This portrait is a miniature set in a jewelled pendant (both drawing and setting the work of Mr Charles Ricketts) which was bequeathed to the Fitzwilliam Museum on the death of Katharine Bradley.

Warm thanks are also tendered to the publishers who have kindly given permission to use extracts from the poets' works, including Messrs G. Bell and Sons, the Vale Press, the Poetry Bookshop (for *Borgia*, *Queen Mariamne*, *Deirdre*, and *In the Name of Time*); to Mr T. Fisher Unwin,

Messrs Sands and Company, and Mr Eveleigh Nash; and to Mr Heinemann for Mr Arthur Symons's poem *At Fontainebleau*.

A Bibliography is appended of all the Michael Field books which have been published to date; but there still remain some unpublished MSS.

MARY STURGEON

Oxford
November 1921

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Yea, gold is son of Zeus: no rust
  Its timeless light can stain;
The worm that brings man's flesh to dust
  Assaults its strength in vain:
More gold than gold the love I sing,
A hard, inviolable thing.

Men say the passions should grow old
  With waning years; my heart
Is incorruptible as gold,

’Tis my immortal part:
Nor is there any god can lay
On love the finger of decay.
Long Ago, XXXVI

I. BIOGRAPHICAL

ONE evening, probably in the spring of 1885, Browning was at a dinner-party given by Stopford Brooke. He had recently met for the first time two quiet ladies who had come up to the metropolis from Bristol to visit art galleries and talk business with publishers, and he suddenly announced to the company in a lull of conversation, “I have found a new poet.” But others of the party had made a similar discovery: it had jumped to the eye of the intelligent about a year before, when a tragedy called *Callirrhoë* had been published; and several voices cried simultaneously to the challenge, “Michael Field!”

Only Browning, however, and a few intimate friends of the poets, knew that Michael Field was not a man, but two women, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. They were an aunt and niece, and came of a Derbyshire family settled at Ashbourne. Joseph Bradley, its representative there in 1749, with his son and grandson after him, were merchants of substance and culture. They were men of intellect as well as business men, and seem to have possessed between them all the elements which ultimately became concentrated in our two poets. There is evidence of a leaning to philosophy, a feeling for the arts, an interest in drama; and, more significant still, there is one Charles Bradley who was “a prolific and meditative writer both of prose and song.”

Katharine Harris Bradley, the elder of the two poets, was

born at Birmingham on October 27, 1846. Her grandfather had migrated there from Ashbourne in 1810, and her father, Charles Bradley, was a tobacco-manufacturer of that city. He had married in 1834 a Miss Emma Harris of Birmingham, and, in the simpler fashion of those times, he and his wife were living in a house adjoining their place of business in the old quarter of the town. There, at 10 Digbeth, Katharine was born, The only other child of the union was a daughter who was eleven years old at Katharine's birth. She was named Emma, and was of first importance in the lives of the Michael Fields. For, being a thoughtful creature, of rare sweetness and strength of character, she largely shaped the life of the little sister who was so much younger than herself; and, still more vital fact, she afterward became the mother of our second poet. She married, about 1860, James Robert Cooper, and went with him to live at Kenilworth. Her daughter, Edith Emma Cooper, was born there, at their house in the High Street, on January 12, 1862.

Both poets, therefore, took their origin in the heart of a Midland city and came of merchant stock. These facts may have larger significance than their bearing on environment and nurture, though that was important. But regarded more widely, they seem to relate Michael Field and her fine contribution to English literature to that movement in our modern civilization which, in the last two or three generations, has drawn commerce into intimate connexion with our art and letters. Such names as Horniman, Fry, Beecham (and there are others of similar import) suggest at once drama, art, music. They are associated in one's mind with new impulse, energy, initiative, and above all with disinterested service of the arts; and they are connected chiefly with Midland towns. In like manner Michael Field, with her gift of tragic vision sublimated from fierce Derbyshire elements, may be seen spending a strenuous life and a moderate fortune, without reward or

encouragement, to enrich English poetry.

Neither poet ever attended school, or swotted to gain certificates; which is probably one reason why they both became highly educated and cultured people. When Katharine was two years old her father died from cancer —;a disease which afterward carried off her mother, and from which both our poets died. Mrs Bradley removed to a suburb of Birmingham, and was careful to provide that the lessons which she gave her little girls should be supplemented, as the need arose, by other and more advanced teaching. But the children were allowed to follow their bent, and authority took the form of a wise and kindly directing influence. We hear in those early days of eager studies in French, painting, and Italian. We hear, too, of friendships with a group of lively cousins. One of them remembers Katharine's vivid childhood, and speaks of her as a gay and frolicsome creature, highly imaginative and emotional, with whom he used to act and recite. She adored poetry, would write even her letters in rhyme, and had, as a small child, a particular fondness for Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. And she joined with the greatest delight in the dramatic ventures which the group from time to time attempted, such as the representation at Christmas of the passage of the Old Year and the coming of the New.

It is probable that such conditions were ideally suited to a child of great natural gifts and buoyant temperament. Katharine evidently thrived under them both in mind and body; and by the time of her sister's marriage to Mr Cooper she was not only the healthy, happy, and well-developed young animal who was the potential of all she afterward became, but she had already embarked upon the classics and was beginning to interest herself in German language and literature. Thus it happened that when, about 1861, she and her mother made their home with the Coopers at Kenilworth, Katharine became the natural companion of the little Edith, born in the following year,

when Katharine was sixteen. But she was, from the first, much more than that. Mrs Cooper remained an invalid for life after the birth of her second daughter, Amy, and Katharine fostered Edith as a mother. She lavished on her an eager and rather imperious affection. She led her, as the child grew old enough, along the paths that she herself had adventurously gone, and although Edith was always shyer and more hesitating than Katharine, poetic genius was dormant in her too, only waiting to be stimulated by Katharine's exuberance and led by her audacity. Edith, stepping delicately, followed the daring lead of her elder with a steadiness of mental power which was her proper gift; and she reaped from Katharine's educational harvest (won in all sorts of fields, from literatures ancient and modern, from the Collège de France, Newnham, University College, Bristol, and numerous private tutors) fruits more solid and mature than even Katharine herself.

When the poets removed to Stoke Bishop, Bristol, in 1878 it was with intellectual appetites still unsatisfied, and determined to pursue at University College their beloved classics and philosophy. They were already, in the opinion of a scholar who knew them at that time, fair latinists: they possessed considerable German and French, and some Italian, while Edith's enthusiasm for philosophy was balanced by Katharine's for Greek. Edith, docile in so much else, yet "could not be coaxed on" in Greek; not even later, when Browning, who used to speak affectionately of her as "our little Francesca," one day gently pressed her hand and said "in honied accents, '*Do learn Greek.*'" What could a young poet do, overwhelmed by the courtly old master's flattery, except promise softly, "I will try"? But it is not recorded that the effort took her very far. Katharine the Dionysian (always a little over-zealous for her divinities, whether Thracian or Hebrew) did not cease from coaxing; and perhaps did not perceive, for she could be obtuse now and then, how radical was

Edith's austere latinity. A poem of this period, addressed by Katharine to Edith, and called *An Invitation*, throws a gleam on their student days. Through it one sees as in morning sunlight their strenuous happy existence, their eager welcome to the best that life could offer, and their fortunate freedom to grasp it, whether it were in books or art, in sunny aspects or beautiful new Morris designs and textures. For they were, from the first, artists in life.

Come and sing, my room is south;
Come with thy sun-governed mouth,
Thou wilt never suffer drouth,
Long as dwelling
In my chamber of the south.

Three stanzas describe the woodbine and the myrtles outside the window, and the cushioned settee inside. Then:

Books I have of long ago
And to-day; I shall not know
Some, unless thou read them, so
Their excelling
Music needs thy voice's flow:

Campion, with a noble ring
Of choice spirits; count this wing
Sacred! All the songs I sing
Welling, welling
From Elizabethan spring.

French, that corner of primrose!
Flaubert, Verlaine, with all those
Precious, little things in prose,
Bliss-compelling,
Howsoe'er the story goes:

All the Latins *thou* dost prize!

Cynthia's lover by thee lies;
Note Catullus, type and size
Least repelling
To thy weariable eyes.

And for Greek! Too sluggishly
Thou dost toil; but Sappho, see!
And the dear Anthology
For thy spelling.
Come, it shall be well with thee.

It is clear from all the testimony that Katharine and Edith were extremely serious persons in those first years at Stoke Bishop, a fact which seems to have borne rather hard on the young men of their acquaintance. Thus, a member of their college, launching a small conversational craft with a light phrase, might have his barque swamped by the inquiry of one who really wanted to know: "Which do you truly think is the greater poem, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*?" It was an era when Higher Education and Women's Rights and Anti-Vivisection were being indignantly championed, and when 'æsthetic dress' was being very consciously worn—;all by the same kind of people. Katharine and Edith were of that kind. They joined the debating society of the college and plunged into the questions of the moment. They spoke eloquently in favour of the suffrage for women, and were deeply interested in ethical matters. They were devotees of reason, and would subscribe to no creed. Katharine was a prime mover of the Anti-Vivisection Society in Clifton, and was its secretary till 1887. She was, too, in correspondence with Ruskin, was strongly influenced by him in moral and artistic questions, and was a companion of the Guild of St George—;though that was as far as she ever went in Ruskinian economics. Both of the friends adored pictures, worked at water-colour drawing, wore wonderful flowing garments in 'art' colours, and dressed their hair in a loose knot at the nape

of the neck.

But more than all that, they were already dedicated to poetry, and sworn in fellowship. That was in secret, however. Student friends might guess, thrillingly, but no one had yet been told that Katharine had published in 1875 a volume of lyrics which she signed as Arran Leigh, nor that Edith had timidly produced for her fellow's inspection, as the experiment of a girl of sixteen, several scenes of a powerful tragedy; nor that the two of them together were at that moment working on their *Bellerophôn* (with the accent, please), which they published in 1881, signed "Arran and Isla Leigh." But such portentous facts kept them very grave; and their solemnity naturally provoked the mirth of the irreverent, especially of undergraduate friends down from Oxford, who knew something on their own account about æsthetic crazes and the leaders of them. Thus a certain Herbert Warren came down during one vacation and poked bracing fun at them. The story makes one suppose that he must have disliked the colour blue in women and the colour green in every one—;possibly because he was then in his own salad days. For when somebody mischievously asked him in Katharine's presence, "Who *are* this æsthetic crowd?" he promptly replied, "They're people as green as their dresses."

But their women friends were more favourably impressed. To them the two eager girls who walked over the downs for lectures every morning were persons of a certain distinction who, despite careless hair and untidy feet, could be "perfectly fascinating." Their manner of speech had been shaped by old books, and was a little archaic. Later it became a "mighty jargon," understood only of the initiate. Their style of dress was daringly clinging and graceful in an age of ugly protuberances. And though these things might suggest a pose to the satirical, they were very attractive to the ingenuous, who saw them

simply as the naïve signs they were of budding individuality. Their friendship, too, was clearly on the grand scale and in the romantic manner. They were, indeed, absorbed in each other to an extent which exasperated those who would have liked to engage the affections of one or the other in another direction. Yet they were companionable souls in a sympathetic circle, Katharine with abounding vitality and love of fun and keen joy in life, expansive and forthcoming despite an occasional haughtiness of manner; and Edith lighting up more slowly, to a rarer, finer, more delicate exaltation.

Yet, in spite of many friends and a genuine interest in affairs, one perceives that they constantly gave a sense of seclusion from life, of natures set a little way apart. It was an impression conveyed unwittingly, and in spite of themselves; and one is reminded by it of their sonnet called *The Poet*, written, I believe, about this time, but not published until 1907, in *Wild Honey*:

Within his eyes are hung lamps of the sanctuary:
A wind, from whence none knows, can set in sway
And spill their light by fits; but yet their ray
Returns, deep-boled, to its obscurity.

The world as from a dullard turns annoyed
To stir the days with show or deeds or voices;
But if one spies him justly one rejoices,
With silence that the careful lips avoid.

He is a plan, a work of some strange passion
Life has conceived apart from Time's harsh drill,
A thing it hides and cherishes to fashion

At odd bright moments to its secret will:
Holy and foolish, ever set apart,
He waits the leisure of his god's free heart.

Consciously or not, the poem is a portrait. More than one touch is recognizable, and there can be no doubt that the opening lines give a glimpse of Edith. They suggest for this reason that the sonnet was written by Katharine; and if that is so, her use of the word *dullard* sweetly turns the edge of the complaint of critical friends that Katharine could be thoroughly stupid. Of course she could!—;why not? though, to be sure, it was very provoking of her. Returning, however, to the resemblance to Edith. She had never the good health of Katharine, and her beauty, which was of the large, regular, blonde type, suffered in consequence. One of her friends says: "She was as if touched by a cloud—;crystalline and fragile as flowers that love the shade." All who knew her speak of the extraordinary look of vision in her eyes: time after time one hears of the 'inspiration' in her face, which is visible in no matter how poor a photograph or hasty a sketch. Katharine had intensity of another kind: warm, rich, glowing, a lyric and almost bacchic expression. But in Edith there was "a Tuscan quality of refinement, the outward expression of an inward beauty of thought."

One cannot but associate those "lamps of the sanctuary" with the psychic power which Edith undoubtedly possessed. An incident attested by their cousin, Professor F. Brooks, may be given to illustrate this. It was occasioned by the death of Edith's father in the Alps. He and his younger daughter Amy were there on holiday in 1897, and had planned to climb the Riffelalp. They wrote of their plan to Katharine and Edith, who received the letter at home in England on the day that the ascent was being made. Edith read the letter and passed it to Katharine with the remark: "If they go to the Riffelalp they will go to their doom." And, probably about the time she was speaking, Mr Cooper met his death, for he was lost in the ascent, and his body was not recovered for many months.

That is only one of several psychic experiences which

incontestably occurred to Edith Cooper, the most impressive being the vision which appeared to her as her mother was dying. Edith, who was helping to nurse her mother, had gone into another room to rest, as it was not believed that the end was near. She afterward told her friend Miss Helen Sturge that in the moment of death her mother's spirit passed through the room and lingered for an instant beside the bed on which Edith was lying. The event is recorded explicitly in a poem published in *Underneath the Bough* (first edition):

When thou to death, fond one, wouldst fain be starting,
I did not pray
That thou shouldst stay;
Alone I lay
And dreamed and wept and watched thee on thy way.

But now thou dost return, yea, after parting,
And me embrace,
Our souls enlace;
Ask thou no grace;
Thou shalt be aye confinèd to this place.

Alone, alone I lie. Ah! bitter smarting!
Thou to the last
Didst cling, kiss fast,
Yet art thou past
Beyond me, in the hollow of a blast.

* * *

'Michael Field' did not come into existence until the publication of *Callirrhoë* in 1884. The poets put behind them, as experimental work, the two volumes which they had already published, and began afresh, changing their pen-names the better to close the past. The pseudonym under which they now hid themselves was chosen somewhat arbitrarily, 'Michael' because they liked the

name and its associations, ‘Field’ because it went well with ‘Michael.’ But it is true also that they had a great admiration for the work of William Michael Rossetti, whom, Katharine says in one of her letters, they regarded as “a kind of god-father”; and it is true, too, that ‘Field’ had been an old nickname of Edith. Their family indulged freely in pet names, and Edith was teased by a nurse, from her boyish appearance during a fever in Dresden, as the “little Heinrich.” Thenceforth she became Henry for Katharine, and Katharine was Michael to her and to their intimates.

Callirrhoë was well received, and went to a second edition in November of the same year. It is amusing now to read the praises that were lavished upon ‘Mr Field’ upon his first appearance. Thus the *Saturday Review* talked of “the immutable attributes of poetry ... beauty of conception ... strength and purity of language ... brilliant distinction and consistent development of the characters ... a poet of distinguished powers”—;all of which is very true. The *Spectator* announced “the ring of a new voice which is likely to be heard far and wide among the English-speaking peoples”—;and that may yet become true, if the English-speaking peoples are allowed to hear the voice. The *Athenæum* saw “something almost of Shakespearean penetration”; the *Academy* rejoiced in “a gospel of ecstasy ... a fresh poetic ring ... a fresh gift of song ... a picturesque and vivid style.” The *Pall Mall Gazette* quoted a lyric which “Drayton would not have refused to sign”; and, not to multiply these perfectly just remarks, the *Liverpool Mercury* crowned them all in a flash of real perception, by noting that which I believe to be Michael Field’s first virtue as a dramatist in these terms: “A really imaginative creator ... will often make his dialogue proceed by abrupt starts, which seem at first like breaches of continuity, but are in reality true to a higher though more occult logic of evolution. This last characteristic we have remarked in Mr

Field, and it is one he shares with Shakespeare."

But alas for irony! These pæans of welcome died out and were replaced as time went on by an indifference which, at its nadir in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, could dismiss Michael Field in six lines, and commit the ineptitude of describing the collaboration as a "curious fancy." Yet the poets continued to reveal the "immutable attributes of poetry"; their "ecstasy" grew and deepened; their "Shakespearean penetration" became a thing almost uncanny in its swift rightness; their "creative imagination" called up creatures of fierce energy; their "fresh gift of song" played gracefully about their drama, and lived on, amazingly young, into their latest years —;which is simply to say that, having the root of the matter in them, and fostering it by sheer toil, they developed as the intelligent reviewers had predicted, and became highly accomplished dramatic poets. But in the meantime the critics learned that Michael Field was not a man, and work much finer than *Callirrhoë* passed unnoticed or was reviled; while on the other hand *Borgia*, published *anonymously*, was noticed and appreciated. One might guess at reasons for this, if it were worth while. Perhaps the poets neglected to attach themselves to a useful little log-rolling coterie, and to pay the proper attentions to the Press. Or it may be that something in the fact of a collaboration was obscurely repellent; or even that their true sex was not revealed with tact to sensitive susceptibilities. But whatever the reason, the effect of the boycott was not, mercifully, to silence the poets: their economic independence saved them from that; and a steady output of work—;a play to mark every year and a great deal of other verse—;mounted to its splendid sum of twenty-seven tragedies, eight volumes of lyrics, and a masque without public recognition. The poets did not greatly care about the neglect. They had assurance that a few of the best minds appreciated what they were trying to

do. Browning was their staunch friend and admirer; and Meredith, chivalrous gentleman, wrote to acclaim their noble stand for pure poetry and to beg them not to heed hostility. Swinburne had shown interest in their work, and Oscar Wilde had praised it. Therefore only rarely did they allow themselves a regret for their unpopularity. But they were human, after all, Michael particularly so; and once she wrote whimsically to Mr Havelock Ellis, "Want of due recognition is beginning its embittering, disintegrating work, and we will have in the end a cynic such as only a disillusioned Bacchante can become."

Their reading at this period, and indeed throughout their career, was as comprehensive as one would expect of minds so free, curious, and hungry. To mention only a few names at random, evidence is clear that they appreciated genius so widely diverse as Flaubert and Walt Whitman, Hegel and Bourget, Ibsen and Heine, Dante, Tolstoi, and St Augustine. Yet so independent were they, that when it comes to a question of influence, proof of it is by no means certain after the period of their earliest plays, where their beloved Elizabethans have obviously wrought them both good and evil. Traces of Browning we should take for granted, he being so greatly admired by them; yet such traces are rare. And still more convincing proof of their independence surely is that in the Age of Tennyson they found his laureate suavity too smooth, and his condescension an insult; while at a time when the Sage of Chelsea thundered from a sort of Sinai those irreverent young women could talk about "Carlyle's inflated sincerity."

Again, one may think to spy an influence from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in their *Callirrhoë*; but it is necessary to walk warily even here. For the genius of Michael Field, uniting as it does the two principal elements of art, Dionysian and Apolline, is therefore of its nature an illustration of Nietzsche's theory. They needed no tutoring

from him to reveal that nature, for they knew themselves. Nor did they need prompting to the primary spiritual act of the tragic poet. From the beginning the philosophic mind lay behind their artistic temper. Very early they had confronted reality, had discovered certain grim truth, and had resolutely accepted it. Not until they became Roman Catholics did they become optimists, and then they ceased, or all but ceased, to be tragic poets.

* * *

When the Michael Fields left Bristol for Reigate in 1888 they withdrew almost entirely from contact with the world of affairs, and devoted themselves to their art. Old friendships and interests were left behind with the old environment. Their circle became restricted, as did their activities of whatever kind, to those which should subserve their vocation. Family ties, which had always been loosely held, were now (with the exception of Mrs Ryan, Edith's sister Amy) almost completely dropped. Their life became more and more strictly a life of the mind, and more and more closely directed to its purpose. It was a purpose (that "curious fancy" so called by the learned critic) which had been formulated very early—;long before Katharine found it expressed for her to the echo in Rossetti's *Hand and Soul*: "What God hath set in thine heart to do, that do thou; and even though thou do it without thought of Him, it shall be well done. It is this sacrifice that He asketh of thee, and His flame is upon it for a sign. Think not of Him, but of His love and thy love." To that, as to a religion, they deliberately vowed themselves, guarding their work from trivial interruption, plunging into research, and yielding themselves up to the persons of their drama, in whom they vividly lived. But although their imaginative adventures were stormy and exhausting (the death of one of their characters would leave them stricken), external events were very few. Never had dramatist so undramatic a career; and there is an amazing contrast between the

tremendous passions of their Tragic Muse and the smoothness, temperance, and quietude of their existence. One has no right to be surprised at the contrast, of course, for that untroubled, purposeful living was the condition which made possible their achievement. And that a virile genius can consist with feminine power, even feminine power of a rather low vitality, hardly needs to be remarked, since Emily Brontë wrote. Moreover, the contrast is determined by the physical and mental basis proper to genius of this type, one that is peculiarly English, perhaps, with sanity, common sense, and moral soundness at the root of its creative faculty. No doubt the type has sometimes the defects of its virtues, and Michael Field, who was inclined to boast that there was no Celtic strain in her blood, was not immune from faults which the critical imp that dances in the brain of the Celt might have saved her from. For he would have laughed at a simplicity sometimes verging on the absurd, at grandeur when it tended to be grandiose, at emotion occasionally getting a little out of hand; just as he would have mocked a singleness and directness so embarrassing to the more subtle, and have declared that no mature human creature in this bad world has any right to be so innocent as all that!

Happily we are not concerned with the impishness of the satirical spirit: we have simply to note that it was a physical and mental (and possibly a racial) quality which enabled Michael Field thus to dedicate herself to poetry and steadily to fulfil her vow. Even the poets' journeys now were less disinterested than their early jaunts in France and Germany for the pure pleasure of seeing masterpieces. Thus, in these later days, if they went to Edinburgh, it was for the Marian legend; to the New Forest, it was for some faint sound of Rufus's hunting-horn; to Italy, it was for innumerable haunting echoes of Imperial Rome, of the Borgia, of the Church; to bits of old France, for memories of Frankish kings; to Ireland, for a

vanishing white glimpse of Deirdre; to Cornwall, in the belief that they might be favoured to give "in the English the great love-story of the world, Tristan and Iseult." All of which does not mean, however, that those journeys were not very joyous affairs. Several of them were sweetened by friendships, as the visits to the Brownings at Asolo, the Italian tours with Mr and Mrs Bernard Berenson, and jolly times in Paris, with peeps at lions artistic and literary. It was on one of these occasions that their British eyes were assailed (not shocked, for they were incapable of that kind of respectability) by a vision of Verlaine "coming out of a shop on the other side of the road with a huge roll of French bread under one arm." It was Mr Arthur Symons who pointed out to them this apparition; and it was he who delightedly watched their joy in the woods of Fontainebleau, and afterward wrote a poem to recapture the memory of Edith Cooper on that day:

It was a day of sun and rain,
  Uncertain as a child's quick moods;
And I shall never pass again
  So blithe a day among the woods.

The forest knew you and was glad,
  And laughed for very joy to know
Her child was with her; then, grown sad,
  She wept because her child must go.

And you would spy and you would capture
  The shyest flower that lit the grass;
The joy I had to watch your rapture
  Was keen as even your rapture was.

The forest knew you and was glad,
  And laughed and wept for joy and woe.
This was the welcome that you had
  Among the woods of Fontainebleau.

One is not surprised to see how brightly our poets struck the imagination of the few who knew them, particularly of their poet and artist friends. Mr Charles Ricketts, Mr and Mrs Berenson, Father John Gray, Mr and Mrs William Rothenstein, and, later, Mr Gordon Bottomley were of those whose genius set them in tune with the fastidious, discriminating, and yet eclectic adoration of beauty which was the inspiration of Michael Field. They have all confessed the unique charm of the poets (a charm which consisted with "business ability and thoroughly good housekeeping"); and Mr Bottomley has contrived, by reflecting it in a poet's mirror, to rescue it from Lethe:

> The marvellous thing to me is the way in which their lives and their work were one thing: life was one of their arts —;they gave it a consistency and texture that made its quality a sheer delight. I have never seen anywhere else their supreme faculty of identifying being with doing.
>
> I do not mean simply that this beauty of life was to be seen in their devotion to each other; though there was a bloom and a light on that which made it incomparable. Nor do I mean only their characters and personalities, and the flawless rhythm, balance, precision that each got into her own life —;though these, too, contributed to the sensation they always gave me of living as a piece of concerted chamber-music lives while it is being played.
>
> But, beyond all this, I mean that this identity of life and art was to be seen in the slight, ordinary things of existence. They did not speak as if their speech was considered; but in the most rapid, penetrating interchange of speech, their words were always made their own, and seemed more beautiful than other people's. This always struck me anew when either of them would refer to the other in her absence as "My dear fellow": the slight change in the incidence and significance of the phrase turned the most stale of ordinary exclamations into something which suddenly seemed valuable and full of delicate, new, moving music. It seemed said for the first time....

With Miss Cooper in particular one had the feeling that her mind moved as her body moved: that if her spirit were visible it would be identical with her presence. The compelling grace and sweet authority of her movement made me feel that her own Lucrezia would have looked so when she played Pope. It is of the great ladies of the world that one always thinks when one thinks of her.

Mr Ricketts first met the poets in 1892, when he and Mr Shannon were editing *The Dial*. Michael Field became a contributor to that magazine, and the acquaintance thus begun ripened into close friendship and lasted for twenty years. In memory of it Mr Ricketts has presented to the nation a picture by Dante Gabriel Rossetti which now hangs in the National Gallery of British Art. Its subject, Lucrezia Borgia, was treated by Michael Field in her Borgia tragedy, and is one of her most masterly studies. I am indebted to Mr Ricketts for many facts concerning the poets' lives in their Reigate and later Richmond periods, and for some vivid impressions of them. Thus, at their first meeting:

Michael was then immensely vivacious, full of vitality and curiosity. When young she had doubtless been very pretty, and for years kept traces of colour in her white hair. But if Michael was small, ruddy, gay, buoyant and quick in word and temper, Henry was tall, pallid, singularly beautiful in a way not appreciated by common people, that is, white with gray eyes, thin in face, shoulders and hands, as if touched throughout with gray long before the graying of her temples. Sudden shadows would flit over the face at some inner perception or memory. Always of fragile health, she was very quiet and restrained in voice and manner, a singularly alive and avid spectator and questioner, occasionally speaking with force and vivacity, but instinctively retiring, and absorbed by an intensely reflective inner life.

Yet it is clear that she, as well as Michael, loved the give-and-take of social intercourse within their circle. She

too liked to catch up and pass on an amusing story about a contemporary, and thoroughly enjoyed a joke. After the austere Bristol days, when their gravity might have been at least a thousand years old, they grew steadily younger through the next fifteen years. “Michael had,” says Father John Gray, “the look, the laugh, and many of the thoughts of a child.” Both were witty, but Michael, the richer and more spontaneous nature, had a warm gift of humour almost Rabelaisian. She loved fun, and jesting, and mimicry. With her frequent smile, her sparkling eyes, and her emphatic tones and gestures, she was an extremely animated storyteller. Henry’s wit had a more intellectual quality: it was quicker and sharper in edge than Michael’s, and it grew keener as she grew older, till it acquired almost a touch of grimness, as when she said to a friend during her last illness: “The doctor says I may live till Christmas, but after that *I must go away at once*.”

Henry was not a sedulous correspondent: indulged by Michael, she only wrote letters when a rare mood prompted her to do so. But the fortunate friend who heard from her at those times received a missive that was like an emanation from her soul, tender, wise, penetrative, gravely witty and delicately sweet. One would like to give in full some of those letters, but must be content to quote characteristic fragments of them. Thus, in March of 1888, she wrote to Miss Alice Trusted:

I feel you will never let yourself believe how much you are loved by me.... Your letter is one of the most precious I have ever received. Ah! so a friend thinks of one; would that God could think with her! But it is a deep joy to me to be something to the souls that live along with me on the earth....

In May she wrote to the same friend an account of a visit to their “dear old friend, Mr Browning”:

He came in to us quite by himself, with one of his impetuous exclamations, followed by “Well, my two dear

Greek women!" We found him well, lovingly kind, grave as ever. His new home is well-nigh a palace, and his famed old tapestries (one attributed to Giulio Romano) have now a princely setting.... He fell into a deep, mourning reverie after speaking of the death of Matthew Arnold, whom he called with familiar affection—;Mat. Then his face was like the surface of a grey pool in autumn, full of calm, blank *intimité*.

Another visit is described in July of the same year:

We have again been to see Mr Browning, and spent with him and his sister almost the only perfect hours of this season. Alice, he has promised me to play, the next time we meet, some of Galuppi's toccatas!... He read to us some of the loveliest poems of Alfred de Musset, very quietly, with a low voice full of *recueillement*, and now and then a brief smile at some touch of exquisite playfulness. He is always the poet with us, and it seems impossible to realise that he goes behind a shell of worldly behaviour and commonplace talk when he faces society. Yet so it is: we once saw it was so. In his own home, in his study, he is "Rabbi ben Ezra," with his inspired, calm, triumphant old age. His eyes rest on one with their strange, passive vision, traversed sometimes by an autumnal geniality, mellow and apart, which is beautiful to meet. Yet his motions are full of impetuosity and warmth, and contrast with his steady outlook and his 'grave-kindly' aspect.

One finds acute artistic and literary estimates in these letters. Thus, after an appreciation of Whistler's nocturnes, she remarks of his Carlyle portrait, "It is a masterpiece; the face has caught the fervid chaos of his ideality."

Of Onslow Ford's memorial of Shelley she says: "The drowned nude ... is an excellent portrait of the model, and therefore unworthy of Shelley, to my mind. The conventional lions and the naturalistic apple-boughs don't coalesce. The Muse is but a music-girl. I like the bold treatment of the sea-washed body."

She sketches an illuminating comparison between the art of Pierre Loti's *Pêcheur d'lslande* and that of Millet; and

declares that Huysmans' work "is the last word of decadence—;the foam on the most recent decay—;and yet there is something of meagre tragedy about it."

After a visit to the opera she writes:

We went to see Gluck's *Orfeo*. Julia Ravogli attaches one to her with that love which is almost chivalry, that one gives to a great and simple artist. Her hands are as expressive as a countenance, and her face is true, is pliant to ideal passion. Her voice is lovely, and she sits down by her dead Euridice and sings *Che farò* as a woodland nightingale sings her pain.

She exclaims at the "elegant Latin" used by Gerbert in his letters, "written in the dark tenth century"; agrees with Matthew Arnold that Flaubert has "neither compassion nor insight: his art cannot give us the verity of a temperament or soul"; but adds of his (Flaubert's) correspondence, "To me each letter in which he writes of art is full of incitement, help, and subtle justness."

She gives her impressions of Pater when delivering a lecture in December 1890:

He came forward without looking anywhere and immediately began to read, with no preface. He never gave his pleasant blue eyes to his audience.... There is great determination, a little brutality (in the French sense) about the lower part of his face; yet it is under complete, urbane control. His voice is low, and has a singular sensitive resonance in it —;an audible capacity for suffering, as it were. His courteous exterior hides a strong nature; there is something, one feels, of Denys l'Auxerrois in him—;a Bacchant, a Zagreus.

A criticism of the comedy of the nineties, and its manner of production, is thrown off lightly in a letter to Miss Louie Ellis:

We went to Pinero. He was taken at snail's pace, and so much that was disgraceful to humanity had to be endured at that rate that we groaned. Satire should always be taken with rapier speed—;to pause on it is to make it unendurable. The

malice and anger must sparkle, or the mind contracts and is bored.

On an Easter visit to the country, in 1894, she wrote to Miss Trusted:

Yesterday we saw our first daffodils: they were growing in awful peace. The sun was setting: it had reached the tranquil, not the coloured stage; the air held more of its effect than the sky yet showed. We did not pluck a daffodil: they grew inviolable. After sunset, as we came thro' the firs, we saw a round glow behind them—;it was the Paschal moon rising. A chafer passed, like the twang of one string of an Æolian harp. The sound of the wind in the firs is cosmic, the gathering of many waters etherealized; and the sharp notes of individual birds cross it with their smallness, and with a pertinacity that can throw continuance itself into the background.

Writing to another friend at a much later date, she says:

We have seen Tagore for a quarter of an hour—;seen the patient and quiet beauty of a lustrous-eyed animal. He is full of rumination, affability; and his smile is a jewel, the particular jewel of his soul.

And in 1913, the last year of her life, when Mr Rothenstein had been making a sketch of her head for a portrait, she wrote him thanks which were both critical and appreciative, concluding:

It is a lovely and noble drawing: it is such a revelation of a mood of the soul—;so intense, I said, seeing it at first—;that is how I shall look at the Last Judgment, "When to Thee I have appealed, Sweet Spirit, comfort me."

It is significant that, wherever they went, the servants fell in love with Henry. Her manner, always gracious, was to them of the most beautiful courtesy and consideration. Michael was more imperious, more exigent. Warm and generous in her friendships, she yet was capable of sudden fierce anger for some trivial cause—;when, however, she

would rage so amusingly that the offender forgot to be offended in his turn. She might banish a friend for months, for no discoverable reason, or might in some other rash way inconsiderately hurt him; but, though she would be too proud to confess it, she would be the unhappiest party of them all to the quarrel. “Of the wounds she inflicts, Michael very frequently dies,” she once wrote in a letter.

But of her devotion to Henry, its passion, its depth, its tenacity and tenderness, it is quite impossible to speak adequately. From Henry’s infancy to her death—;literally from her first day to her last—;Michael shielded, tended, and nurtured her in body and in spirit. Probably there never was another such case of one mind being formed by another. There surely cannot be elsewhere in literature a set of love-songs such as those she addressed to Henry; nor such jealousy for a comrade’s fame as that she showed to the reviewers after Henry’s death; nor such absolute generosity as that with which she lavished praise on her fellow’s work, and forgot her own share in it. But there is not room, even if one could find words, to speak of these things. One can only snatch, as it were in passing, a few fragments from her letters. And this I do, partly to bring home the other proof of Michael’s devotion, namely, that she always did the very considerable business involved in the collaboration, and wrote nearly all the social letters: but chiefly so that some direct glimpses may be caught of her warm human soul.

Thus we may find, in her correspondence with Mr Elkin Mathews about *Sight and Song* in 1892, one proof out of many which the poets’ career affords of their concern for the physical beauty of their books. They desired their children to be lovely in body as well as in spirit; and great was their care for format, decoration, binding, paper, and type: for colour, texture, quality, arrangement of letterpress, appearance of title-page, design of cover. In every detail there was rigorous discrimination: precise

directions were given, often in an imperious tone; experiments were recommended; journeys of inspection were undertaken; certain things were chosen and certain others emphatically banned. But in the midst of exacting demands on some point or other one lights on a gracious phrase such as "We know you will share our anxiety that the book should be as perfect as art can make it"; or, this time to the printers, "I am greatly obliged to you for your patience."

Again, Michael is discovered, in 1901, when a beautiful view from the old bridge at Richmond was threatened by the factory-builder, rushing an urgent whip to their friends. That which went to Mr Sydney Cockerell ran:

> If you think our rulers incompetent, prove yourself a competent subject. The competent subject does not plead evening engagements when a buttercup piece of his England, with elms for shade and a stretch of winding stream for freshness, is about to be wrenched away. He toddles over to the Lebanon estate, notes the marked trees, learns what trees are already felled, makes himself unhappy ... and then goes home and writes to the papers.

In a letter to Mr Havelock Ellis, in May 1886, there is a picturesque but concise statement of the manner of the poets' collaboration:

> As to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined. *The Father's Tragedy*, save Emmeline's song and here and there a stray line, is indeed Edith's work: for the others, the work is perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies; if one begins a character, his companion seizes and possesses it; if one conceives a scene or situation, the other corrects, completes, or murderously cuts away.

To the same correspondent she wrote in 1889, on the subject of religion:

> If I may say so, I am glad of what you feel about the Son of

Man, the divineness of His love and purposes towards the world. There is an atrocious superstition about me that I am orthodox ... whereas I am Christian, pagan, pantheist, and other things the name of which I do not know; and the only people with whom I cannot be in sympathy are those who fail to recognize the beauty of Christ's life, and do not care to make their own lives in temper like His.

And in 1891, because Henry was recovering from her Dresden illness, Michael wrote in jocular mood:

As you are a follower of Dionysos, I charge you get me Greek wine. The Herr Geheimrath has ordered it for several weeks for Edith, and in England they make as though they know it not.

One finds in letters to Miss Louie Ellis amusing evidence of both our poets' love of beautiful clothes, as well as of Michael's gift of humorous expression. Thus, in 1895, just before a visit to Italy, she wrote:

I dream an evening frock to wear at Asolo. It is of a soft black, frail and billowy, and its sleeves are in part of this, with silvery white satin ribbon tied about. If you have a better dream, send word; if not, tell me how much (I mean how little) the gown would be. I want this to be not expensive —;not *the* evening gown, but *an* evening gown.

And later, after the frock was received, she wrote:

How often, from "Afric's coral strand," will a voice of praise go up to Louie for that *perfect* silk gown; I shall want to be in little black frills for ever.... Do you know where in the city I can get a big shady hat to wear with it in Italy? Not a monster, but of a kind Theocritus would admire.

The following too brief passages are from some of Michael's letters to the Rothensteins: the occasion of the first being to commiserate them on the discomforts of a removal:

February 1907.—;Unhappy ones! Take care of your

everlasting souls! I have got my soul bruised black and blue, beside some still ridging scars, in removals.

Yet there was once a transportation that was a triumph. It was suggested we should be drawn by pards to Richmond in a golden chariot. The pards was a detail not carried out; but of Thee, O Bacchus, and of Thy ritual, the open landau piled high with Chow and Field and Michael, doves and manuscripts and sacred plants!—;all that is US was there; and we drove consciously to Paradise.

There are delightful letters about the Rothenstein children, in particular of an unfortunate catastrophe to a parcel of birds' eggs sent to a certain small John in January 1907:

Leaving home on Monday in great haste, I besought Cook to pack the tiny gift to John, and to blow the eggs. This may have been ill done, I fear. Poets are the right folk for packing....

My heart goes out to your son. It is so odd—;in a play we are writing there is half a page of Herod Agrippa (the highly revered slaughterer of the innocents, though that's 'another story'). He talks exactly like John—;and the FUTURE will say I copied him!...

Two days later.—;Furious am I over the smashed eggs. But what can we hope? It is the office of a cook to smash eggs. More eggs will be born, and John shall have some whole.

January 20th, 1907.—;Say to John—;if Nelson had promised a postcard to a lady, he would not have kept her waiting. He would have gone forth, in the snow, with guns being fired at him all round, and a lion growling in front, to choose that postcard. Say, I am quite sure of this.

In the spring of 1908 the poets went on one of their frequent country visits, which were often rather in the nature of a retreat, and this time they put up at an inn called the Tumble-Down-Dick. Thence they wrote:

You must some day visit us here, in our bar-parlour. The

masons have been having a grand dinner next door—;smoke and excellent knife-and-fork laughter, discussion, the pleasure of all speaking at once—;how these things enchant the poets from their muttered breviaries!

And a few days later:

If Noli wants a jest, tell her Edith has heard from a Richmond priest—;our reputation is completely gone in Richmond.... A lady had said to him she did not understand how anyone with self-respect could put up at the Tumble-Down-Dick Inn! The priest, who is Irish and sent us here under counsel of a Benedictine friar, is in great bliss!!

And in March 1910, having both been ill, they conclude thus an invitation:

Try to come on Wednesday. We are gradually gathering together the teeth, glasses, wigs, and complexions that may enable us again to greet our friends. Henry is among the flowers. Henry sees the flowers: I see Henry, I have little to say. Speech, I suppose, will go next!! "Yet once," as Villon says....

From the time of the *Dial* contributions Mr Ricketts became their adviser in matters of book-production. It was on his suggestion, too, that they removed from Reigate to the small Georgian house at 1 The Paragon, Richmond, which overlooks the Thames from its balconies and sloping garden, and remained their home until their death. That was in 1899, after the death of Henry's father had left them free to choose another home. It was in this year that they published their masque, *Noontide Branches*, from the Daniel Press at Oxford. They had been in Oxford two years earlier, in October 1897, while they were still under the shadow of Mr Cooper's uncertain fate. He had been lost on the Riffelalp in June, and his body had not yet been recovered. But the beauty of Oxford brought them peace, and the kindliness which met them there, in particular from Mr and Mrs Daniel, lightened the cloud that lay on their

spirits. Michael wrote afterward from Richmond to Miss Trusted to record gratefully how Mr Daniel, though she had been quite unknown to him, had consented to print the masque and warmly befriended them.

They would joke about the minute size of the house at Richmond, which nowadays has dwindled to a mere annexe. “Do not squirm at the lowly entrance,” they wrote in an invitation to a friend; “within the snail-shell are two poets most gay and happy”; and added, referring to their dog, “*Do* come! Chow says you will, or he will know the reason why.” Probably there never was so modest a shell with so exquisite an interior; but of this it is Mr Gordon Bottomley who can best speak:

> Their rooms were not less flawless than their poems. Their interiors showed a rarer, wider, more certain choice than those of the Dutch painters. The silvery, clear lithographs of their friend Mr C. H. Shannon were hung all together in a cool northern room, which they seemed to permeate with a faint light; and in another room the gold grain of the walls, alike with the Persian plates that glowed on the table as if they were rich, large petals, seemed to find their reason for being there in the two deeply and subtly coloured pictures by Mr Charles Ricketts on the walls.
>
> But always there was the same feeling of inevitable choice and unity everywhere: in a jewelled pendant that lay on a satin-wood table, in the opal bowl of pot-pourri near by on which an opal shell lay lightly—;a shell chosen for its supreme beauty of form, and taken from its rose-leaf bed by Miss Cooper to be shown to a visitor in the same way as she took a flower from a vase, saying, “This is *Iris Susiana*,” as if she were saying “This is one of the greatest treasures in the world,” and held it in her hand as if it were a part of her hand.

It is true that at Paragon they were gaily and happily busy: the years there were fruitful of mellow achievement. Nevertheless, it was there that the spiritual crisis of their life came, when in 1907 both poets entered the Roman

Catholic Church. Henry was received into the Church at St Elizabeth's, Richmond, on April 19th of that year; and Michael went to Edinburgh on May 8th to be received by their old friend the poet Father John Gray.

The crisis had been prepared for partly by Henry's ill-health, which encouraged her contemplative habit of mind —;that in turn operating upon the religious sense which had always underlain their rationality. It was Henry who first made the great decision when, after reading the Missal in Latin, she suddenly exclaimed: "This is sacrifice: from this moment I am a Catholic." But their curious small volume called *Whym Chow* suggests (and the suggestion is confirmed by the facts) that the course of that event was strongly influenced by the death of their Chow dog. It was a mental process of great interest for the student of the psychology of religious conversion, but too intimate and subtle to be discussed here; and *Whym Chow*, printed privately in an exquisite small edition in the Eragny Press, was intended only for the eyes of friends. The chief value of the book is therefore bibliographical. Yet, in order to comprehend how the rationalists of the year 1887 and the declared pagans of 1897 became the Catholics of the year 1907, one thing may at least be said—;that in the manner of the death of the little creature they loved both the poets came to realize sacrifice as the supreme good. It was not by any means a new idea to them; on the contrary, it will be seen that it was their earliest ideal. And the reason for its triumphant force at this stage lay precisely in the fact that what had been an instinct then, an intuitive, hardly conscious, but integral element of character, became now a passionate conviction.

In February 1911 Henry was attacked by cancer; and in one of the few letters that she wrote she says (to the Rothensteins):

Of course the shock was great and the struggle very hard at first. I write this that you may both understand our silence....

We had to go into Arabian deserts to repossess our souls.

At the same time her fellow was writing to their friend Miss Tanner:

Think of us as living in retreat, as indeed we are.... Henry has very sharp pains, with moments of agony every day to bear. The Beloved is showing her how great things she must suffer for His Name's sake.... For the rest, I am all dirty from the battle, and smoked and bleeding—;often three parts dragon myself to one of Michael—;and sometimes I have only clenched teeth to offer to God.

Michael's sufferings, through the long ordeal of Henry's illness, were not, however, confined to spiritual anguish. She herself was attacked by cancer six months before Henry's death on December 13th, 1913. But she did not reveal the fact; no one knew of it save her doctor and her confessor, and they were under a bond of secrecy. She nursed her fellow tenderly, hiding her own pain and refusing an operation which might have been remedial, encouraging Henry in the composition that she still laboured at, attending to the details of its publication, and snatching moments herself to write poems which are among the most poignant in our language. Neither poet would consent to the use of morphia, for they desired to keep their minds clear; and to the last, in quiet intervals between attacks of pain, they pursued their art. In a cottage in the village of Armitage, near Hawkesyard Priory, where they stayed for a few weeks in the summer of 1911, I stood in the small sitting-room they occupied, and there, so the good housewife told me, Miss Cooper, though very weak, sat day after day—;writing, writing. All through 1912, with occasional weeks of respite and certain visits to Leicester and Dublin, the work went on: *Poems of Adoration*, Henry's last work, was published in that year. In the summer of 1913, from the Masefields' house at 13 Well Walk, Hampstead (taken for the poets by the

generosity of Mrs Berenson), Michael wrote to Miss Fortey:

> Henry has now fearful pain to bear, and the fighting is severe. Pray for me, dear Emily. *Mystic Trees* is faring horribly.

Yet *Mystic Trees*, Michael's last written book, was published in that year.

When December brought release at last to Henry's gentle spirit, Michael's endurance broke down. A hæmorrhage revealed her secret on the day of Henry's funeral; a belated operation was performed, and for some weeks Michael was too ill to do more than rail angrily against the Press notices of her fellow:

> Nothing in the least adequate has yet been done—;nothing of her work given. I am hovering as a hawk over the reviewers.

By March 1914, however, she was at work again, collecting early poems of Henry's to publish in a volume called *Dedicated*, and about this time she wrote to Miss Fortey:

> You will rejoice to know I have written a poem or two —;one pagan. I am reverting to the pagan, to the humanity of Virgil, to the moods that make life so human and so sweet.

The poems she mentions appeared in the *Dedicated* volume shortly afterward.

As the summer grew her malady gained the mastery; and, knowing that death was approaching, she removed to a house in the grounds of Hawkesyard Priory, in order to be near the ministration of her friend and confessor, Father Vincent McNabb, a Dominican priest who was at that time Prior at Hawkesyard. One of the few recorded incidents of her last days (it was on August 24th, 1914, just a month before she died) is touchingly characteristic. Father Vincent had taken tea with her, and Michael, propped by

her pillows, yet contrived to add dignity and grace to the little ceremony with which she presented to him a copy of Henry's *Dedicated*. One can imagine the scene—;the long, low room on the ground floor in which her bed had been placed for greater convenience in nursing her; the windows giving on to an unkempt lawn and a tangle of shrubs; summer dying outside, and inside the dying poet reading to the white Dominican poem after poem by her fellow, in a voice that must have shaken even as the feeble hand shook in writing the record down. Finally the priest, taking the book in his turn, read to her her own poem *Fellowship*, and, hearing her soft prayer for absolution on account of it, turned away his face and could find no answer.

I

In the old accents I will sing, my Glory, my Delight,
In the old accents, tipped with flame, before we knew the right,
True way of singing with reserve. O Love, with pagan might,

II

White in our steeds, and white too in our armour let us ride,
Immortal, white, triumphing, flashing downward side by side
To where our friends, the Argonauts, are fighting with the tide.

III

Let us draw calm to them, Beloved, the souls on heavenly voyage bound,
Saluting as one presence. Great disaster were it found,
If one with half-fed lambency should halt and flicker round.

IV

O friends so fondly loving, so beloved, look up to us,
In constellation breaking on your errand, prosperous,
O Argonauts!...
... Now, faded from their sight,
We cling and joy. It was thy intercession gave me right,
My Fellow, to this fellowship. My Glory, my Delight!

The weeks of Michael's passing witnessed the passing of the age to which she belonged, for they were those in which the Great War began. It is clear that Michael Field, in the noble unity of her life and work, represented something that was finest in the dying era; and yet she was, in certain respects, aloof from that Victorian Age, and in advance of it. It is profoundly moving to see how, even in extremity, her genius remained true to itself. It was so true, indeed, that in her pitiful, scanty record of those days one may catch a glimpse, through her winging spirit, of the moments of greatness to which the spirit of England rose in that crisis.

She was desolated at the thought of the killing, the suffering, the destruction of beauty. But she too felt the stimulus which the vastness of the danger gave to the national spirit, and she longed to serve. "I want to live now the times are great," she wrote to Mrs Berenson. "There are untended wounds to think of—;that makes me ashamed"—;ashamed, she meant, of the tendance that her own wound was receiving. Again, on August 13th:

But Michael cannot join with Jenny the cook. "What news of the war, Jenny?" ... "*Good news; fifty thousand Germans killed!*"

She followed with desperate anxiety the calamitous events in Belgium, writing on August 28th:

I am suffering from the folly of our English troops being

wasted, and making fine, orderly retreats.... Namur gave me a shock from which I cannot recover.

And finally, on September 19th:

Father Prior mourns Louvain even worse than Bernard —;the destruction of the precious beauty. Tell me, is Senlis safe?

After that day little or nothing more was written. Every morning she rose at seven o'clock, and, assisted by her nurse, dressed and was wheeled in a chair through the Priory park to hear Mass at the chapel. On September 23rd the nurse wrote at Michael's bidding to Miss Fortey:

Miss Bradley is anxious about you: she fears you may be ill. She is frightfully weak to-day, but had a splendid night and is very happy.

On September 26th Michael for the first time did not appear in the chapel at her usual early hour. Father Vincent, seeing her vacant place, had a sudden certainty of the end. "*Consummatum est*" rushed to his lips as he ran down the grassy slopes to the house. He found Michael stretched on the floor of her room, dead, with her head on the bosom of the kneeling nurse. She had sighed her last breath one moment before. She had succeeded in dressing ready to go to Mass, but the effort to step into the carriage had been too much. She sank down and died quietly in the nurse's arms.

* * *

There are questions of intense interest involved in the life of the Michael Fields—;personal, psychological, literary—;which one must put aside, angry at the compulsion of restricted space. But their life was in itself a poem, and the beauty of it is unmistakable. These were heroic and impassioned souls, who, in honouring their vow to poetry, gave life, it is true, "a poor second place"; and yet they fulfilled life itself, with a completeness few are

capable of, in love and sacrifice. Michael would quote from her copy of St Augustine: "*Aime, donc, et fais ce que tu voudras ensuite*"; and love was her gift to the fellowship, as Henry's was intellect. But the collaboration was so loyal, the union so complete, that one may search diligently, and search in vain, for any sign in the work both wrought that this is the creation of two minds and not of one. It is possible to sift the elements, of course, seeing in this work vividly contrasting qualities; that it is at one and the same time passionate and intellectual, exuberant and dignified, swift and stately, of high romantic manner and yet psychologically true; that it is fierce, sombre, vehement, and at the same time gentle, delicate, of the last refinement of perception and feeling. One can even identify the various elements (when one knows) as more characteristic of one poet or the other; perceiving that Michael was the initiator, the pioneer, the passionate one from whom the creative impulse flowed; and that to Henry belonged especially the gift of form, that hers was the thoughtful, constructive, shaping, finishing genius of the fellowship. But it is not possible, in the plays on which the two worked, to point to this line or that speech, and say "It is the work of Michael" or "It is the work of Henry." You cannot do it, because the poets themselves could not have done it. The collaboration was so close, so completely were the poets at one in the imaginative effort, that frequently they could not themselves decide (except by reference to the handwriting on the original sheet of manuscript) who had composed a given passage.

In like manner it is possible to follow the poets through the facts of their existence, and to see that existence shape itself, despite mental vicissitude and apparent change, triumphantly of one piece throughout—;generous in colour, rich in texture, graceful in design. It might seem that gulfs were fixed between their grave, austere, studious girlhood, the joyous blossoming of their maturity with its

pagan joy in beauty, and the mysticism of their last years. They appeared to go through many phases, and even to pass, under the eyes of astonished and indignant friends, out of all mental resemblance to what they were believed to be. A friend of Bristol days, Miss Carta Sturge, writing in a strain of regret for this apparent inconsistency, adds generously:

> Perhaps the fine flavour of their genius, its subtle sensitiveness to impressions, its unspoilt bloom, might have suffered had they had more ... consistency and stability. It is enough that their genius was great, their spirit beautiful, and their companionship of unexampled delight. And that is how we gratefully remember them.

That is finely true; and yet it may be that the tone of regret is unnecessary; for on a complete survey it will be found that Michael Field was deeply consistent from first to last. Through perhaps a hundred changes—;of opinion, of taste, and of deeper things—;she remained the same; and those changes were but steps toward the fulfilment of what she had been from the beginning. Thus one sees the ending of the poets' life as the inevitable outcome of that which they always were—;of a magnificence touched with grace. The Dionysian wine of those early days was poured at last to the Man of Sorrows; the Bacchic revel was turned to tragedy. But it was the same wine; the same energy of enthusiasm; and the latest-written lyrics, devotional pieces composed in suffering and very near to death, have often the audacity and abandon of the worshipper of the vine-god. The poet is Mænad still.

II. THE LYRICS

THE lyrical poetry of Michael Field is much smaller in

bulk than her dramatic work; yet there are eight volumes of it. On the other hand, it is more perfect in its kind than her tragedies, and yet its chiselled, small perfection cannot approach their grandeur.

A story is told about one of the books of lyrics which is amusingly characteristic of the poets. *Underneath the Bough* made its appearance first in the spring of 1893, and was well received. The *Athenæum* reviewer even went so far in admiration as to suggest, of obvious defects, that Michael Field probably *preferred* to write in that way! Soon after the book came out, however, the poets went on an Italian journey with some friends who took a different view of the function of criticism, and who dealt with them faithfully about the weakness of some of the pieces. Thereupon, with a gesture that is entirely their own in its grace and emphasis, the poets confessed their repentance for the defective work by immediately cutting the book to the extent of one-half, and reissued it in the autumn of 1893 with the careful legend "Revised and Decreased Edition." The story, however, does not close on that access of humility which, on a comparison of the two editions, would certainly appear somewhat excessive. But humility was not, at any rate with Michael, a pet virtue. Repenting at leisure of their hasty repentance, they brought out yet another edition, and reinstated many of the poems which they had rejected from number two—;this with a word of defiance to the critics of number one, and a recommendation to them to look for a precedent to *Asolando*.

The third edition is rare, but a copy of it may be seen at the British Museum. It was published in Portland, Maine, in 1898. It still omits about thirty of the pieces from the first edition, but it introduces a number of new ones and restores, among others, the *In Memoriam* verses for Robert Browning which appeared first in the *Academy* for December 21st, 1889, on the occasion of Browning's

death:

Slowly we disarray,
Our leaves grow few,
Few on the bough, and many on the sod.
Round him no ruining autumn tempest blew;
Gathered on genial day,
He fills, fresh as Apollo's bay,
The Hand of God.

It would appear from the preface, however, that there was an additional motive for publishing a third edition in an invitation from the United States to contribute a volume to the "Old World" series, and the poet adds a note of gratitude to her American readers who, as she says, "have given me that joy of listening denied to me in my own island."

Considering the lyrical work as a whole, it is seen to cover Michael Field's poetical career from beginning to end. Not that the lyric impulse was constant (for there were times when the poets' dramatic work absorbed them almost completely); but it never entirely failed. It was, as one would expect, strongest in their early years: it recurred intermittently through the period of the later tragedies, and returned in force when, toward the end of their life, tragic inspiration gave place to religious ardour. Thus, although this poetry is subjective in a less degree than lyrical verse often is, most of the crucial events of the poets' lives are reflected there. The lover of a story will not be disappointed, and the student of character will find enough for his purpose in personal revelation both conscious and unconscious. Moreover, a spiritual autobiography might, with a little patience, be outlined from these eight volumes; and it would be a significant document, illuminating much more than the lives of two maiden ladies in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Such a spiritual history would be complete, in extent at least, for it would begin with Michael's earliest work in *The New Minnesinger* (that title at once suggesting the German influence in English life and letters at the moment, 1875), with its strenuous ethic of Unitarian tendency based on a creed so wide as to have no perceptible boundary; and it would end only with the devotional poetry of her last written volumes where, with no concern for ethics as such, the poet stands at the gate of the well-fenced garden of the Roman Church with a flaming sword in her hand and a face of impassioned tenderness. But in the interval it would pass through her pagan phase, when she revelled in joyful living—;and in the classics, turning their myths into pleasant narrative verse; when in *Long Ago* (1889) she daringly rehandled the Sapphic themes; and when in *Sight and Song* (1892) she tried to convey her intense delight in colour and form by translating into poetry some of the old master-pictures that she loved. More important, however, than those books are in such an autobiography is the human record of joys and loves and sorrows contained in the volume called *Underneath the Bough* (1893); while *Wild Honey* (1908), a collection covering about ten years of her life, brings us down to the epoch of religious crisis and reconciliation with the Church of Rome. Then, with tragic inspiration quelled by Christian hope and submission, all her creative energy flowed into the Catholic lyrics contained in *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913).

One does not pause long on *The New Minnesinger* in this survey of the lyrics, because it was published by Katharine Bradley as Arran Leigh, and is not, therefore, strictly a work of Michael Field. Nor shall we deal with the lyrics in *Bellerophôn*, a volume published by the two poets as Arran and Isla Leigh in 1881. Not that either book is unworthy of study; on the contrary, there are some fine pieces in both. But the poets having elected to leave them

in limbo, where one has had to grope for this mere reference to them, there, for my part, they shall remain. Except to note in passing that, following Swift's *Advice to a Young Poet* to "make use of a quaint motto," the poet has inscribed on the front of *The New Minnesinger* the phrase "Think of Womanhood, and thou to be a woman." That has a significance which is elaborated in the name-piece, whose theme is of love and of the woman-poet's special aptitude to sing about it; and where it is insisted that the singer shall be faithful to her own feminine nature and experience. All through the work of the two poets it will be seen that the principle stated thus early and definitely by the elder one ruled their artistic practice; so that we are justified in extracting this, at least, from Michael's earliest book, and noting it as a conscious motive from the beginning.

I think, too, we are entitled to recover from the shades one small song. For, after all, a great literary interest of the work of the Michael Fields is the amazing oneness of the two voices. The collaboration, indeed, deserves much more space than it is possible to give it here. But it is something to the good if we can glance, in passing, at undoubted examples of each poet's work, hoping to see hints of the individual qualities which each contributed to the fellowship. We have already told how, after Henry's death and when Michael knew that she too must soon die, she hastened to gather together certain early pieces by her fellow, and published them, with a poignant closing piece of her own, in the book called *Dedicated* (1914). That closing poem, *Fellowship*, closed her artistic life: it is Michael's last word as a poet. But the point for the moment is that she has given us in *Dedicated* the means of recognizing Henry, and distinguishing between the two poets in their youthful work. One may take from *The New Minnesinger*, therefore, as characteristic of the younger Michael, such a piece as *The Quiet Light*:

After the sunset,
  Before the night,
There comes a season
  Of quiet light.

After the dying,
  Before the death,
There comes a drawing
  Of quiet breath.

Hush of the daylight,
  O whisper why
That childlike breathing
  Before we die!

That is a slight thing which does not, of course, represent Michael at anything like her full power; but it does already suggest the emotional basis of her gift, and her lyrical facility. The piece which follows, *Jason*, is a luckier choice for Henry, not only in that it gives her greater scope, but in that it is probably a maturer work than the other. The comparison would, therefore, be unfair to Michael if one were judging of relative merits; but we are thinking for the moment only of a difference in *kind* of poetic equipment. And the poem is given for this further fact—;it was chosen by Michael herself to read to Father Vincent McNabb a few days before she died, in exultation at her fellow's genius:

"Upon the sea-beach I diffuse my limbs;
  My wail athwart the harping sea-plain heaves;
The shards are bitter and the ocean brims
  My sorrow from a fount where darkness grieves;
I, Jason, by this vessel of my pride,
Lie, as vain flotsam, 'neath its doughty side.

A wife I had and children—;she is gone

To her own land—;but first she waved my feet
To where my sons, her wrath had fallen upon,
Lay dead together 'neath their cradle sheet.
A bride I had, but ere to bed she came,
Ashes of flame she was, ashes of flame.

And I had comrades in grand years of youth;
They are all slain or care no more for deeds.
A golden aim I followed to its truth;
It is a story now no mortal heeds.
Once I drove oxen of fire-shooting lips,
Once I was ruler of a ship of ships." ...

The pebbles ground like teeth within a jaw;
A moan of angry timber thundered forth;
And the great poop of Argo rolled its maw,
With a wave's action, from the south to north;
Earth quaked in fear at glimpse of Jason's doom,
As slant on him fell Argo as a tomb.

Clearly there are elements here different from those of *The Quiet Light*. One feels in this poem a dramatic movement and a sense of tragedy which are not simply given in the data of the noble old story; one sees structural skill in the shaping of the narrative, and recognizes in a memorable line or two—;"A golden aim I followed to its truth" and "Ashes of flame she was, ashes of flame"—;the final concentration of thought and feeling where great poetry begins.

Perhaps we are not mistaken, therefore, in distinguishing, even so early as these two poems, the contrasting qualities of the two poets which, met in happy union, made so clear a single voice that Meredith was amazed when he discovered that Michael Field was two people. One may define these qualities as emotional on the one side and intellectual on the other. It is, of course, the old distinction between rhetoric and imagination, matter

and form; and clearly shows itself again in the two volumes of devotional poetry at the end of their life, where Henry is seen as kin to Herbert and Michael as kin to Vaughan. And though the whole story of the collaboration cannot be contained within any statement so simple as that, its fundamentals are rooted in this complementary relation between the two minds.

Returning to the lyrics, I choose frankly the pieces which throw some light on the poets' lives. And although I do this from an unashamed interest in their story, and without immediate reference to the merits of the verse as poetry, there should be a chance that the poetical values of pieces wrought under the stress of intimate feeling will be not lower but higher than those of others. So, indeed, the event proves; for of the lyrics which may be safely attributed to Michael those are the best which can be called her love-poems. Of love-interest, in the attractive common meaning of the term, there is not a great deal in the work of either poet; and in that of Michael it is mainly comprised in half a dozen songs in *Underneath the Bough*. Sapphic affinities notwithstanding (and imaginary adventures in that region), the two ladies had their measure of Victorian reticence; though that did not decline upon Victorian prudishness. But Michael wrote love-poetry of another kind than the romantic, in a series about her fellow which is probably unique in literature. It will be found in the third book of *Underneath the Bough*, and is supplemented by pieces scattered through later books, notably a small group at the end of *Mystic Trees*. Those poems are a record of her devotion to Edith Cooper, and it is doubtful whether Laura or Beatrice or the Dark Lady had a tenderer wooing. They explain, of course, the slightness of a more usual (or, as some would put it, a more normal) love-interest in Michael's work. But it need not be supposed that there was anything abnormal in this devotion. On the contrary, it was the expression of her mother-instinct, the outflow of the

natural feminine impulse to cherish and protect. And this she herself realized perfectly; for there is a passage in one of her letters to Miss Louie Ellis which runs:

> I speak as a mother; mothers of some sort we must all become. I have just been watching Henry stripping the garden of all its roses and then piling them in a bowl for me....

But that Michael was 'normal' in the mere sense of having had love-affairs there is proof enough without recourse to the vulgarity of spying into every lyric for a record of actual experience. Her dramatic instinct would make that pitfall even more dangerous in her case than in most, so that one would not dare to venture in the direction at all without a warrant. But, armed with the poet's confession, one may quote from a tiny sequence which has an almost tropical breath. It tells of a passion that blossomed quickly in hot, bright colour, and died with sudden vehemence.

Across a gaudy room
I looked and saw his face,
Beneath the sapless palm-trees, in the gloom
Of the distressing place,
Where everyone sat tired,
Where talk itself grew stale,
Where, as the day began to fail,
No guest had just the power required
To rise and go; I strove with my disgust:
But at the sight of him my eyes were fired
To give one glance, as though they must
Be sociable with what they found of fair
And free and simple in a chamber where
Life was so base.

As when a star is lit
In the dull, evening sky,
Another soon leaps out to answer it,

Even so the bright reply
Came sudden from his eyes,
By all but me unseen.
Since then the distance that between
Our lives unalterably lies
Is but a darkness, intimate and still,
Which messages may traverse, where replies
May sparkle from afar, until
The night becomes a mystery made clear
Between two souls forbidden to draw near:
Creator, why?
* * *
We meet. I cannot look up; I hear
He hopes that the rainy fog will clear:
My cheeks flush him back a hope it may,
And at last I seek his eyes.
Oh, to greet such skies—;
The delicate, violet, thunder-gray,
Behind a spirit at mortal play!
Who cares that the fog should roll away?
* * *
As two fair vessels side by side,
No bond had tied
Our floating peace;
We thought that it would never cease,
But like swan-creatures we should always glide;
And this is love
We sighed.

As two grim vessels side by side,
Through wind and tide
War grappled us,
With bond as strong as death, and thus
We drove on mortally allied:
And this is hate
We cried.

* * *

Go to the grave,
Die, die—;be dead!
If a Judgment-Angel came and said
That I could save
My heart and brain, if I could but will
For a single moment that you should die,
I would clasp my hands, and wish you ill,
And say good-bye.

Go to the grave,
Die, die—;be dead!
If the Judgment-Angel came and said
That I could save
My body and soul, if I could but will
For as long as an hour that you should die,
My hands would drop, and my eyes would fill,
And the angel fly.

If we were concerned with the art of this verse rather than its tale one would be compelled to consider a touch of rhetoric and a violence of gesture which are characteristic of Michael not at her best; but which do correspond with the turbulent youthful emotion out of which the poems were born. Michael's authentic love-story, however, is that which centres upon Henry; and the poems to Henry express a master-passion. There was an element of her nature as strong and as constant as its poetic impulse, and that was her affection for her fellow. Indeed, she was greater as a lover than as a poet; for her life was her finest poem, and Henry was its inspiration. It follows that she was never so happy as when she was engaged upon this theme; and that the sequence I have mentioned is a joyful record of the fellowship. Here is a piece which describes the sealing of the bond between the poets in those early days when they had not yet embarked on their great quest:

It was deep April, and the morn
Shakspere was born;
The world was on us, pressing sore;
My love and I took hands and swore,
Against the world, to be
Poets and lovers evermore,
To laugh and dream on Lethe's shore,
To sing to Charon in his boat,
Heartening the timid souls afloat;
Of judgment never to take heed,
But to those fast-locked souls to speed,
Who never from Apollo fled,
Who spent no hour among the dead;
Continually
With them to dwell,
Indifferent to heaven or hell.

Next we may take a portrait of Henry in her girlhood when the two began to collaborate, this giving incidentally a description of what was, on the testimony of intimate friends (and, indeed, of the poets themselves), their method of work:

A girl,
Her soul a deep-wave pearl
Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries;
A face flowered for heart's ease,
A brow's grace soft as seas
Seen thro' faint forest-trees:
A mouth, the lips apart,
Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze
From her tempestuous heart.
Such: and our souls so knit,
I leave a page half-writ—;
The work begun
Will be to heaven's conception done
If she come to it.

Exactly in that way the two would often co-operate, working together actually on one piece. When it was a question of a big work—;of a tragedy or a chronicle-play—;there was, of course, a united exploration of the ground and a mapping of it. The two poets would go together to the British Museum or some other great library for the research. The scheme was then fully discussed, ideas were exchanged, conceptions of character formed and tested, and scenes allotted to suit individual taste or aptitude. But the collaboration was even more intimate than that. They would readily interchange their parts; and frequently they would be engaged together upon a page, a speech, or even a single line. It is therefore no poetic licence which declares that the half-written sheet of one would be completed to perfection by the other, but only further proof of the way in which the diverse elements of these two minds were fused in a union so complete that the reader cannot credit a dual authorship, and the poets themselves could hardly distinguish their individual contributions.

There is among the poems to Henry a dainty mock-pastoral in praise of her beauty which might have been written by an Elizabethan songster to his mistress; and a sonnet called *Constancy* which speaks with graver passion:

I love her with the seasons, with the winds,
As the stars worship, as anemones
Shudder in secret for the sun, as bees
Buzz round an open flower: in all kinds
My love is perfect; and in each she finds
Herself the goal; then why, intent to tease
And rob her delicate spirit of its ease,
Hastes she to range me with inconstant minds?
If she should die, if I were left at large
On earth without her—;I, on earth, the same
Quick mortal with a thousand cries, her spell
She fears would break. And I confront the charge,

As sorrowing and as careless of my fame
As Christ intact before the infidel.

There are pieces which reveal Henry, quieter perhaps, but deeply tender toward her fellow:

My lady hath a lovely rite:
When I am gone
No prayer she saith
As one in fear:
For orison,
Pressing her pillow white
With kisses, just the sacred number,
She turns to slumber;
Adding sometimes thereto a tear
And a quick breath.

There is a short poem in which Michael is thinking about the nature of Henry's genius, and perceives its tragic power as her peculiar gift:

Apollo and the Muses taught thee not
Thy mighty strain, enchantment to the mind,
Thralling the heart by spell of holy fears;
Awful thou sought'st Erinys' sacred grot,
And the Eternal Goddess, well-inclin'd,
Hath given thee songs, for the dull life of tears.

And in another piece she compares and contrasts her own gift with that of Henry in imagery as brilliant as its criticism is just:

Mine is the eddying foam and the broken current,
Thine the serene-flowing tide, the unshattered rhythm.
Light touches me on the surface with glints of sunshine,
Dives in thy bosom disclosing a mystic river:
Ruffling, the wind takes the crest of my waves resurgent,

Stretches his pinions at poise on thy even ripples:
What is my song but the tumult of chafing forces,
What is thy silence, Beloved, but enchanted music!

It is evident that Michael knew herself and her impulsive and exuberant Muse, which, to quote one of the irreverent faithful among her friends, would sometimes merely "fizz" into expression. That it could be too facile, and was, by comparison with Henry's depth, superficial, is true. Michael had not the syllogistic mind of her fellow, and arrived at conclusions by an intuitive process rather than by reasoning. She was capable of unintelligent questions and occasional stupid moods that exasperated the critical type of mind which is so much cleverer than that. But she brought a positive contribution to the fellowship, nevertheless, in swift perception, intense ardour, keen sensibility, and above all in the generosity of temper that found its chief expression in devotion to her fellow-poet. Thus the most gracious of her love-lyrics is that in which, after having fostered the younger mind with infinite sympathy, making possible all that it became and achieved, she withdraws herself to cede the higher place to her lover:

Methinks my love to thee doth grow,
And this the sign:
I see the Spirit claim thee,
And do not blame thee,
Nor break intrusive on the Holy Ground
Where thou of God art found.

I watch the fire
Leap up, and do not bring
Fresh water from the spring
To keep it from up-flaming higher
Than my chilled hands require
For cherishing.

I see thy soul turn to her hidden grot,
And follow not;
Content thou shouldst prefer
To be with her,
The heavenly Muse, than ever find in me
Best company.

The love-story of Henry's life was not so frankly revealed; she was never so forthcoming as Michael. Nevertheless, there was such a story, and in outline it seems to have been one of the convergence of kindred minds, of friendship growing to passion, of love declared and reciprocated, but not fulfilled because of some other tie which bound both lover and beloved.

It is not difficult to see how such a crisis might arise in Henry's life. Delicate in health and shy of temperament, she was from her childhood sheltered by Michael, and surrounded by a love which she was accustomed to accept as simply as the air she breathed. Just so unconsciously she would receive the homage offered by their friends, drifting into a closer relation with one of them, both of the lovers cheated by the tranquil air which overlay her depth of feeling, until a sudden surprising passion overtook them. That the awakening for Henry meant renunciation sounds a little old-fashioned to a current philosophy which sees no virtue in the verb 'to renounce,' and demands fulfilment, not only as the highest good, but as the holiest duty of the human creature. But either that modern doctrine is not so new as it sounds, or these two ladies were in advance of their time, for they held it, and (at least in their art) persuasively commended it. They wrote a charming play, *The Cup of Water*, deliberately to claim the woman's right to love, and to demonstrate the cruelty and waste of frustration. And they once said, in a whimsical letter to a friend:

Doing and being good is all very well in its way; but it is

not the same thing as doing and being happy. If the Lord had a lion's mouth (like the one at Venice), how many complaints I should drop into it about his treatment of young women. All the plants have some sunshine: why not some love in each woman's life?

Nevertheless, when it came to the test of action, theory went to the winds, and Henry renounced her lover for her fellow. She held herself bound by every tie of tenderness and gratitude, and no other course was conceivable save to shut the gates of the fortress and bar them against that clamorous joy.

Speak not, reveal not.... There will be
In the unchallenged dark a mystery,
And golden hair sprung rapid in a tomb.

Human instinct may rebel at the spectacle of life so baffled; and common sense, in its short way with problems, may deny a valid cause for the sacrifice. But a longer vision is compelled to observe that fulfilment was not, after all, withheld. It came on the spiritual plane, however; for it is safe to say that we owe the finest work of Michael Field to the fact that Henry did not marry her lover:

Then let a mourner rise and three times call
Upon our love, and the long echoes fall.

Before leaving the volume called *Underneath the Bough* it is convenient to take examples of lyrics in a different kind from those we have been considering. Thus we may select two or three pieces which an easy label would describe as nature-poems. There are not a great many which answer fully to that description, for although our poets adored the beauty of the physical world, their Muse was too prepossessed by the movement of human life to surrender itself completely to Nature. Yet by certain aspects of Nature they were deeply stirred—;great spaces,

lofty skies measured by masses of moving cloud, trees blown by the wind—;in short, by just those features in which in old Italian painters people have agreed to see the signs of a religious sense:

O Wind, thou hast thy kingdom in the trees,
And all thy royalties
Sweep through the land to-day.
It is mid June,
And thou, with all thine instruments in tune,
Thine orchestra
Of heaving fields, and heavy, swinging fir,
Strikest a lay
That doth rehearse
Her ancient freedom to the universe.
All other sound in awe
Repeals its law;
The bird is mute, the sea
Sucks up its waves, from rain
The burthened clouds refrain,
To listen to thee in thy leafery,
Thou unconfined,
Lavish, large, soothing, refluent summer-wind!

The two pieces which follow are chosen because they illustrate the touch of fantasy which our poets often added to their nature-poetry—;a touch which gives such grace and charm to the lyrics of their earlier plays.

I will sing what happened to-night on high:
In the frank, wide sky
The wind had put the sun to rout,
The tossed west clouds were floating about;
From the wreath above me, staid and prim,
A star looked out,
Preparing to trim
Her lamp, and to shine as she had shined

Worlds out of mind:
When lo! she felt the wind on her face,
And for joy of him
She left the place
Where she had shined
Worlds out of mind,
To run through the frank, wide sky:
She was veiled by the clouds a moment or two,
Then I saw her scouring across the blue,
For joy of the wind.

* * *

Where winds abound,
And fields are hilly,
Shy daffadilly
Looks down on the ground.

Rose cones of larch
Are just beginning;
Though oaks are spinning
No oak-leaves in March.

Spring's at the core,
The boughs are sappy:
Good to be happy
So long, long before!

The volume called *Long Ago* was published as early as 1889: that is to say, four years before *Underneath the Bough* and nineteen years before *Wild Honey*. It is, however, a more perfect work than either of those two, both of which include poems of very various date, circumstance, and merit. *Long Ago* possesses a unity which they lack, and which characterizes the spirit as well as the form of the book. The fact of its having been designed as a whole and wrought to a finish without any long

interruption may account for its effect of singleness in impulse and style; but its more satisfying inner unity no doubt arises from the harmony that existed between the poets and their theme, Sappho. Critics notwithstanding, it was not so audacious as it seemed for two Victorian ladies to plunge into the task of rendering Sapphic ecstasy. For, first, the leader of the sally was herself a flame of Dionysiac fire; and the inscription on the banner of her life, from its beginning to its end, was love. There would appear to be a real resemblance between Michael's intensity, her exuberance and quick lyrical impulse, and the legendary Sappho. And this, restrained by Henry's sense of form and deepened by their classical lore in poetry and philosophy, should surely have armed them for the adventure.

There is an ironic flavour now in tasting the comments on the book at its appearance. One of the faithful held up protesting hands at the poets' audacity. Another described the book as a "ludicrous and lamentable attempt." Yet Browning praised it, and marked some of the pieces in the manuscript "Good" and "Good indeed!" Meredith wrote to the poets to express his joy in it. The *Academy* reviewer, in June 1889, predicted that it would some day be described as "one of the most exquisite lyrical productions of the latter half of the nineteenth century"; while Wharton, in the preface to the third edition of his *Sappho*, speaks of the "felicitous paraphrases of Michael Field," and quotes from four of them. The contrast between the two opinions is as amusing as such things are apt to be to those who are not the subject of them; but Michael Field did not see the joke (perhaps her sense of humour *was* deficient), and the severer judgments pained her. They were probably based on an assumption that the poets were trying to recreate Sappho, a project which might have justified brickbats if it had ever been entertained. But their aim was simply to make short dramatic lyrics out of the scenes suggested to

their imagination by the Sapphic fragments. The verdict of those most competent to judge the book is, on balance, that they succeeded remarkably well; while as to the average reader, he will surely find something most attractive in the flashing moods of the verse, in its grace and finish, and in its complete harmony. Truly pagan the work is, whether in its sunny aspects or its dark ones, whether in its philosophy or its art. The pursuit of joy, the adoration of beauty, the ecstasy and the pain of love, the gay light and colour of the physical world, its sweet scents and sounds, its lovely shapes and delicate textures, are all here, their brilliance but the brighter for the shadow that flits about them of death and its finality.

They plaited garlands in their time,
They knew the joy of youth's sweet prime,
Quick breath and rapture.
Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss,
And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss,
Kiss, and recapture.

They plaited garlands, even these,
They learned Love's golden mysteries
Of young Apollo;
The lyre unloosed their souls; they lay
Under the trembling leaves at play,
Bright dreams to follow.

They plaited garlands—;heavenly twine!
They crowned the cup, they drank the wine
Of youth's deep pleasure.
Now, lingering for the lyreless god—;
Oh yet, once in their time, they trod
A choric measure.

* * *

Yea, gold is son of Zeus: no rust
Its timeless light can stain;
The worm that brings man's flesh to dust
Assaults its strength in vain:
More gold than gold the love I sing,
A hard, inviolable thing.

Men say the passions should grow old
With waning years; my heart
Is incorruptible as gold,
'Tis my immortal part:
Nor is there any god can lay
On love the finger of decay.

* * *

Thou burnest us; thy torches' flashing spires,
Eros, we hail!
Thou burnest us, Immortal, but the fires
Thou kindlest fail:
We die,
And thine effulgent braziers pale.

Ah, Phaon, thou who hast abandoned me,
Thou who dost smile
To think deserted Lesbos rings with thee,
A little while
Gone by
There will be muteness in thine isle.

Even as a god who finds his temple-flame
Sunken, unfed,
Who, loving not the priestess, loves the fame
Bright altars spread,
Wilt sigh
To find thy lyric glory dead?

Or will Damophyla, the lovely-haired,
My music learn,
Singing how Sappho of thy love despaired,
Till thou dost burn,
While I,
Eros! am quenched within my urn?

* * *

I sang to women gathered round;
Forth from my own heart-springs
Welled out the passion; of the pain
I sang if the beloved in vain
        Is sighed for—;when
They stood untouched, as at the sound
        Of unfamiliar things,
Oh, then my heart turned cold, and then
        I dropt my wings.

Trembling I seek thy holy ground,
        Apollo, lord of kings;
Thou hast the darts that kill. Oh, free
The senseless world of apathy,
        Pierce it! for when
In poet's strain no joy is found,
His call no answer brings,
Oh, then my heart turns cold, and then
        I drop my wings.

When through thy breast wild wrath doth spread
And work thy inmost being harm,
Leave thou the fiery word unsaid,
        Guard thee; be calm.

Closed be thy lips: where Love perchance
Lies at the door to be thy guest,
Shall there be noise and dissonance?
        Quiet were best.

Apollo, when they do thee wrong,
Speechless thou tak'st the golden dart:
I will refrain my barking tongue,
        And strike the heart.

To pass immediately from *Long Ago* to the poets' last

lyrical works may seem a wilful act, considering the length of time between the books, and their amazing unlikeness. Yet there is a very great interest in the contrast and all that it implies, and a piquancy which one may hope is not too irreverent in the reflection that at the root there is no great difference, after all, between the Lesbian songs and the Christian ones.

The volume called *Poems of Adoration* was published in 1912, and *Mystic Trees* in 1913. They were both signed Michael Field, but the first is all Henry's work with the exception of two pieces, and the second is all by Michael except the poems called *Qui Renovat Juventutem Meam* and *The Homage of Death*. The two volumes therefore provide material for a useful study from the point of view of the collaboration; and they are a positive lure to a comparison with the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century, notably, of course, with Herbert and Vaughan. One would not go so far as to claim an absolute likeness between Henry and George Herbert, if only because Henry does not spread herself in tedious moralizing nor indulge in *concetti*. To that extent her work is purer poetry and, one would suppose, purer religion than that of the old poet; and she rises oftener to sublimity. But in essentials the two are close akin—;in sweetness and strength and clarity, in their sense of form, and in terse, vigorous expression. Between Michael and Vaughan the likeness is even closer, and would tempt one far if it were not that our limits prevent straying. But indeed the human and spiritual values of the two books transcend mere literary questions so greatly as to make those look trivial and even impertinent.

For *Poems of Adoration* was published only a few months before Henry died. Much of the book was composed at dead of night, during great pain, when, as her father confessor has remarked, "most of us would be trying not to blaspheme." The poems are in fact those of a dying

woman, and one who had refused herself any alleviating drug. Two of them, *Extreme Unction* and *After Anointing*, were written when she was at the point of death and had received the last offices of the Church. Some bear evidence of acute crises of body or soul; and in some the vision of the mysteries of her faith is so vivid that the poet herself is almost overwhelmed. Once or twice, when she has gone to the limit of spiritual sight, she falters; but never does that fine intelligence stumble into the outer darkness. Perceiving that it is coming near the verge of sanity, it draws back in time to leave the vision distinct and credible.

To the strict eye of criticism these poignant facts may appear irrelevant. I cannot bring myself to think that such splendour of soul has no relation to the art that it produced; but those persons who insist on cleaving the two asunder may be reassured as to the technical accomplishment of this poetry. Often cast into something of the poets' earlier dramatic form, its music is sweet, its measures are rhythmical, and its language has force and clarity. It has a majesty which proclaims its origin, and one has no need to know the circumstances of its birth. Imagination rises, swift and daring, to heights which are sometimes sublime, as in the first poem quoted below. Here the conception of Christ the wine-treader is treated with magnificent audacity of image and metaphor, while underneath runs a stream of thought which, though it makes great leaps now and then, pouring its strong current into cataract as it goes, yet bears its craft safely up and on.

DESOLATION

Who comes?...
O Beautiful!
Low thunder thrums,
As if a chorus struck its shawms and drums.
The sun runs forth
To stare at Him, who journeys north

From Edom, from the lonely sands, arrayed
In vesture sanguine as at Bosra made.
O beautiful and whole,
In that red stole!

Behold,
O clustered grapes,
His garment rolled,
And wrung about His waist in fold on fold!
See, there is blood
Now on His garment, vest and hood;
For He hath leapt upon a loaded vat,
And round His motion splashes the wine-fat,
Though there is none to play
The Vintage-lay.

The Word
Of God, His name ...
But nothing heard
Save beat of His lone feet forever stirred
To tread the press—;
None with Him in His loneliness;
No treader with Him in the spume, no man.

. . . . .

O task
Of sacrifice,
That we may bask
In clemency and keep an undreamt Pasch!
O Treader lone,
How pitiful Thy shadow thrown
Athwart the lake of wine that Thou hast made!
O Thou, most desolate, with limbs that wade
Among the berries, dark and wet,
Thee we forget!

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Lo, from Thy Father's bosom Thou dost sigh;
Deep to Thy restlessness His ear is bent:—;
"Father, the Paraclete is sent,
Wrapt in a foaming wind He passeth by.
Behold, men's hearts are shaken—;I must die:
Sure as a star within the firmament
Must be my dying: lo, my wood is rent,
My cross is sunken! Father, I must die!"
Lo, how God loveth us, He looseth hold....
His Son is back among us, with His own,
And craving at our hands an altar-stone.
Thereon, a victim, meek He takes His place;
And while to offer Him His priests make bold,
He looketh upward to His Father's face.

THE HOMAGE OF DEATH

How willingly
I yield to Thee
This very dust!
My body—;that was not enough!
Fair was it as a silken stuff,
    Or as a spice, or gold,
    Fair to behold!

Beloved, I give Thee all
This Adam's Fall,
This my desert—;
Thy Father would not let Thee see
Corruption, but I give it Thee.
    Behold me thus abhorred,
    My penance, Lord!

A handful in Thy Hand,
As if of fair, white sand,

Thou wroughtest me;
Clean was I for a little while....
This dust is of another style;
Its fumes, most vile of sin
To stink begin.

. . . . .

O Victor King, and when
Thou raisest me again,
For me no fame;
Just white amid the whiter souls,
Efface me 'mid the shining stoles,
Lost in a lovely brood,
And multitude:

My soul even as the Maid
Cophetua arrayed
In samite fine;
And set her by Him on His throne,
O Christ, what homage can atone
For this caprice in Thee
To worship me?

QUI RENOVAT JUVENTUTEM MEAM

Make me grow young again,
Grow young enough to die,
That, in a joy unseared of pain,
I may my Lover, loved, attain,
With that fresh sigh
Eternity
Gives to the young to breathe about the heart,
Until their trust in youth-time shall depart.

Let me be young as when
To die was past my thought:

And earth with straight, immortal men,
And women deathless to my ken,
Cast fear to naught!
Let faith be fraught,
My Bridegroom, with such gallant love, its range
Simply surpasses every halt of change!

Let me come to Thee young,
When Thou dost challenge *Come!*
With all my marvelling dreams unsung,
Their promise by first passion stung,
Though chary, dumb....
Thou callest *Come!*
Let me rush to Thee when I pass,
Keen as a child across the grass!

Mystic Trees, the last book which Michael gave to the world, is more strictly theological than Henry's. Always less the philosopher than her fellow, she took her conversion to Catholicism, in externals at least, more strenuously. She developed, for example, a proselytizing habit which a little tried the patience of her friends, especially those who remembered her as a joyful pagan. That her Christian zeal was as joyful, to her, as her paganism had been did not much console them, or soften the onslaught of her blithe attacks. Indeed, it occasionally led her to acts which she herself afterward repented of. Thus there is a comic touch in the spectacle of Michael, truly English as she was, urging upon Ireland, in the person of a poor old Irishwoman, every benefit but that one which the old woman craved for. For Michael went to great pains to help her, and to get her placed in a home, and she subsequently wrote to a friend, "I am so deeply regretting my part in putting an Irishwoman in a Nazareth house: their love of freedom is so great." The little parable holds Michael's character almost in entirety—;impulsive, eager, generous, wilful, rash; and then deeply penitent and

rushing to make noble amends.

But that over-zeal had a significance for her artistic life too. She wrote in a letter to another friend, "I will pray for Orzie's conversion: *O Louie, be religious! You cannot 'laugh deep' unless you are.*" In the phrase I have italicized Michael is surely confessing, though it may be without intent to do so, that her religion is now awaking in her the same ecstasy which had formerly been awakened by the poetic impulse. To herself it seemed that she had suffered an enormous change, and that she was no longer the old Michael. And it is true that for a time the tragic inspiration of her art was suspended. Perhaps that follows of necessity from the nature of the Christian doctrine, its hope, its humility, its vicariousness, and its consolation. Yet the moment one turns to these religious lyrics one finds the same ecstasy with which the earlier Michael had adored the beauty of the world and had sung the love of Sappho. So, too, in the first work which Michael Field had produced, *Callirrhoë*, the theme is none other than the worship of the god by love and sacrifice. That, in fact, is the meaning implied in nearly all her poetry, as it was the motive force of all her life; and the only change that has occurred when we reach, with *Mystic Trees*, the end, is that the name of the god is altered. But whichever god possessed her had the power to make Michael "laugh deep" in a rapture which, whether of delight or rage or sorrow, was always an intense spiritual joy—;which is simply to say, to evoke the poet in her. The exaltation of spirit which in *Callirrhoë* said of Dionysos "He came to bring Life, more abundant life," and declared "Wert thou lute to love, There were a new song of the heaven and earth," is the same as that which wrote to a friend in early days, "We are with the nun in her cell as with the pagan at the Dionysos' feast"; and which affirmed in a letter to another friend that she welcomed inspiration from whatever source, "whether the wind and fire sweep down

on us from the mighty realms of the unconscious or from the nostrils of a living God, Jehovah, or Apollo, or Dionysos."

But, as we said, to herself she seemed a new creature; she had found a treasure and must run to share it, even as she had burned to impart the Bacchic fire thirty years before. Thence came the scheme of *Mystic Trees*, which, as Father Vincent McNabb suggested to me, seems to be unique in religious poetry. The book contains a cycle of poems, designed to express the mysteries of the Roman Catholic faith as they are celebrated in the seasons of the Church. The "Trees" of the title are the Cedar and the Hyssop, used as an image of the Incarnation: the great Cedar, the Son of God, becoming the little Hyssop, which, in the lovely cover-design by Mr Charles Ricketts, stands on either side of the Cross with bowed head.

The book is divided into three parts, with a small group of poems added at the end, which Michael wrote while Henry was dying. In the first part, called "Hyssop," the story of the Redemption is unfolded in a series of poems representing the life and death of Christ. It is possible to quote only two or three of the incidents thus treated, but we may take first this one describing the presentation of the infant Christ in the Temple:

THE PRESENTATION

They say it is a King
His Temple entering!

The great veil doth not rock
With gust and earthquake shock:

But all the air is stilled
As at a law fulfilled.

Dreams from their graves rise up—;

Melchizidek with cup;

Abraham most glad of heart,
A little way apart.

Mary, to keep God's word,
Brings Babe and turtle-bird.

Lo! Simeon draweth in,
And doth his song begin!

Great doom is for her Son,
And Mary's heart undone.

Oh, Simeon is blest,
Christ in his arms is prest!

Mary's sweet doves are slain,
She takes her Babe again:

And in her heart she knows
He will be slain as those:

And on her journey home
She feels God's kingdom come.

Passing some intervening poems, we take from the same sequence these two members of a group of imagined incidents on the evening of the Crucifixion:

SUNDOWN ON CALVARY

Where art Thou, wandering Bird?
Thy sweet voice is not heard
On this wild day,
When the Father mourns the Son,
When the Son no Father hath,
And Thou hast but chaos for Thy path.

The Father keeps the Sepulchre,
The Son lies quiet there.
Where is thy place?
Where rest in a world undone?
Holy Ghost, a multitude
Guards the Cross; there hardly canst Thou brood.

To the dark waters haste,
Spread pinions on the waste;
There breathe, there play;
Forsake the Wood!
There is no resting-place for Thee
On this lovely, noble, blighted Tree.

. . . . .

But lo, it is sundown;
The bodies taken down,
Quiet the hill:
The Tree drips blood on the path:
And, the jolted beams above,
Croons, calls across the evening-winds, a Dove!

A FRIDAY NIGHT

The Questioner

"Lo, you have wounds and you are speeding fast!
The light is gone!
Have you no cloak to screen you from the blast?
It is not well!"

The Answerer

"Show me the way to Hell,
I must pass on."

The Questioner

"There is indeed hard by a little gate:

But there thou shalt not go.
Thou art too fair;
Golden thy hair doth blow."

The Answerer

"There I must go:
I have an errand there for those that wait,
Have waited for me long."

I showed the gate.

Now is He shut within, and I am found
Alone with blood-stains on the ground.
Would I could go down to that dim
Murk of the shades to those that wait for Him!

We may take from the second part of the book, called "Cedar" and dedicated to the Virgin, two short pieces which help to illustrate the sweetness of this poetry, its tenderness, its intimacy of approach to divine things, and its innocence.

CALLED EARLY

It is a morning very bright;
Through all the hours of the long starry night
Mary hath not been sleeping: for delight
She hath kept watch through the starry night.

Joseph comes to her quietly:
"A journey I must take with thee,
Mary, my wife, from Galilee."
He saw that she had wept,
And all her secret kept.

UNDER THE STAR

Mary is weary and heavy-laden

As a travailing woman may be.
She calleth to Joseph wearily,
"At the inn there is no room for me,
Oh, seek me a little room!"

Joseph returns. "In a cattle-shed
Hard by, I will make for thee thy bed—;
Dost fear to go?
O Mary, look, that star overhead!"
And Mary smiled—;"Where the cattle low
My Son shall be loosed from the womb."

From the third part, which is called "Sward" and therefore is obviously dedicated to ordinary folk, we need take only the little poem which follows. But we ought to remember the occasion of it, that Michael had been compelled to go alone to Mass because Henry was too ill to accompany her.

Lovingly I turn me down
From this church, St Philip's crown,
To the leafy street where dwell
The good folk of Arundel.

Lovingly I look between
Roof and roof, to meadows green,
To the cattle by the wall,
To the place where sea-birds call,

Where the sky more closely dips,
And, perchance, there may be ships:
God have pity on us all!

Michael said, in a letter to a friend, "*Mystic Trees* is for the young"; and one perceives the truth of that. But I do not think that her word 'young' means only 'youthful,' although children would probably understand the poems

readily, and a certain kind of child would delight in them. Nor do I think that they were written with any special audience in mind. But the poet, in reading them afterward, recognized their childlike qualities of simplicity and directness, and their young faith and enthusiasm. Did she realize, one asks oneself, how she had in them recaptured her own youth and its lyrical fervour? She was nearly seventy years old when she wrote them, which is a wonder comparable to Mr Hardy's spring-songs in winter. And though we may accept, if we like, the dubious dictum of the psycho-analyst that every poet is a case of arrested development, that does not make any less the marvel that in old age, after the lyric fire had subsided and the sufferings of her fellow had destroyed the joy of her life, she should have written such poems. For here it is certainly relevant to remember that at this time Henry was dying, and that Michael herself was suffering, silently, the torture of cancer. "Michael has a secret woe of her own," was all that she permitted herself to reveal, in a letter to her closest woman friend. But so stoical was her courage, and so composed her manner, that the hint was not taken, and no one guessed that she too was ravaged by the disease. Before her intimates, as before the world, she kept a cheerful face, in terror lest her fellow should come to know of her state. Her doctor knew, of course, and Father Vincent McNabb. But they were under a bond to spare Henry the added anguish of knowing the truth, and the bond was faithfully kept. Not until her fellow was dead, when Michael had, in fact, laid her in her coffin, did she break silence to the friend who was with her in that ordeal. Two days later a hæmorrhage made it impossible to conceal her condition any longer. "God kept her secret," said Father McNabb, "until the moment when it was no longer necessary"; and without disloyalty to the godhead of the heroic human spirit, we may accept that word from one who brought consolation and devoted friendship to the

poets' last sad days.

It was, then, during the closing weeks of Henry's life, and while Michael was suffering that sorrow and great bodily pain, that she wrote *Mystic Trees*. Yet the poems manifestly bear within them a deep creative joy, and breathe sometimes a holy gaiety of spirit; and it is only at the end of the book, in a tiny section containing four short poems, that the poet allows her anguish of body and mind the relief of expression. For that brief space, so rightly named "A Little While," the inspiration to "laugh deep" failed, and stark tragedy overwhelmed her.

BELOVED, MY GLORY

Beloved, my glory in thee is not ceased,
Whereas, as thou art waning, forests wane:
Unmoved, as by the victim is the priest,
I pass the world's great altitudes of pain.
But when the stars are gathered for a feast,
Or shadows threaten on a radiant plain,
Or many golden cornfields wave amain,
Oh then, as one from a filled shuttle weaves,
My spirit grieves.

SHE IS SINGING TO THEE, *DOMINE*!

She is singing to Thee, *Domine*!
Dost hear her now?
She is singing to Thee from a burning throat,
And melancholy as the owl's love-note;
She is singing to Thee from the utmost bough
Of the tree of Golgotha where it is bare,
And the fruit torn from it that fruited there;
She is singing.... Canst Thou stop the strain,
The homage of such pain?
Domine, stoop down to her again!

CAPUT TUUM UT CARMELUS

I watch the arch of her head,
As she turns away from me....
I would I were with the dead,
Drowned with the dead at sea,
All the waves rocking over me!

As St Peter turned and fled
From the Lord, because of sin,
I look on that lovely head;
And its majesty doth win
Grief in my heart as for sin.

Oh, what can Death have to do
With a curve that is drawn so fine,
With a curve that is drawn as true
As the mountain's crescent line?...
Let me be hid where the dust falls fine!

III. THE TRAGEDIES—;I

THE important fact concerning Michael Field is, of course, that she is a *tragic* poet. The truth may seem too obvious to need stating, when we glance down the list of her works and observe that of the twenty-seven complete plays created within thirty years every one has a tragic theme. But the attributes of a tragic poet are not necessarily revealed in the externals of his art: more than another he is difficult to recognize by his theme, form, and manner. If he could be confidently measured by a rule and appraised on a formula, many anomalies might be drawn to our net, including the urbane and essentially comic spirit of the author of *Cato*, and (not using too fine a mesh in the net) the mere dramaturgic facility of the author of *Herod*. With such as these, behind the formula of tragedy nothing

remains—;no tragic vision, no sense of inimical and warring forces, no terror at their subtle and formidable power, no pity for human creatures doomed to live. But surely it is in these imponderable things that the tragic poet is made manifest, whether they take the garment of tragedy or, as often with Thomas Hardy, gleam sombrely in a lyric. It is in possessing them, and possessing them intensely, with a fierce dramatic impulse driving them, that the greatness of Michael Field consists.

Yet, once assured of the nature of our poet's genius, the mere data of manner become significant. All the plays are tragedies, some of them in Elizabethan form, of five-act length. The very titles are eloquent. Michael Field took thought for the naming of her plays; and although she was often content to adopt simply the name of the protagonist, that is always resonant. Thus *Attila*, *Borgia*, *Mariamne*, *Deirdre*, *Tristan*, *Fair Rosamund* are words with solemn echoes; but, more than that, they indicate the vast issues to which this mind was drawn, and suggest the range of which it was capable. Sometimes a phrase was chosen for a title, as *The Tragic Mary*. This was lifted, with acknowledgments, from Walter Pater; and no apology is needed on that score, for surely it is no minor part of a poet's equipment to know how "to take his own wherever he finds it." In that sense *The Race of Leaves* may be said to have been lifted too—;from Homer and Marcus Aurelius; *The World at Auction* possibly from Gibbon or some much earlier historian, and *In the Name of Time* certainly from Shakespeare.

A complete list of the plays, with their dates, will be found in the Bibliography at the end of this book. There are, as I said, twenty-seven of them; and they were wrought between the years 1881 and 1911. The last four were not published until after the poet's death; but of these *In the Name of Time*, which did not appear until 1919, was being written so long before as 1890; and *A Question of*

Memory was first printed for the actors when the play was performed at the Independent Theatre in October 1893.

Besides complete plays, however, there is a masque called *Noontide Branches* (printed at Oxford by the Daniel Press in 1899), which has charming associations with the late Provost of Worcester and Mrs Daniel. And there is a trialogue called *Stephania* which was published in 1892. Indeed, the bibliographical interest of this poet's work is very great, and would touch the history of several private printing-presses during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Thus *Fair Rosamund* and the poet's Roman trilogy (*The Race of Leaves*, *The World at Auction*, and *Julia Domna*) were issued from the Vale Press of Mr Charles Ricketts, and nobly decorated by him. His border for *Fair Rosamund* is more than a lovely symbol; it expresses with the last fine touch of perception the wild-rose exquisiteness of the spirit of the play. *The Tragic Mary* was printed at the Chiswick Press in 1890: its binding was designed by Professor Selwyn Image, as also was the frontispiece of *Stephania*. *Whym Chow*, the rarest of the Michael Field books and the most curious in content, can hardly be said to have been published at all. It was printed in 1914 at the Eragny Press of Mr and Mrs Lucien Pissarro. Only twenty-seven copies were printed, and of these perhaps not more than half a dozen were given to intimate friends who might be trusted, if not to understand the poems (for they are extravagant and obscure), at least to sympathize with the occasion of them.

For all of their books, with one exception, the poets took pains to secure a comely form and adequate binding, often of white vellum. Even the group which appeared anonymously and in temporary covers between 1905 and 1911 (*Borgia*, *A Question of Memory*, *The Tragedy of Pardon*, *Diane*, *The Accuser*, *A Messiah*, *Tristan*) were printed with distinction on good paper. That the poets had sufficient means and leisure to indulge their taste may

rejoice the bibliophile; but there is no doubt that the cost of books so produced was too high to gain them a large public. At one time they themselves suspected this, and experimented with a cheaper form. Hence the one exception (*Brutus Ultor*) to their practice. This work was published in 1886 as a small paper-covered booklet at the price of ninepence. Michael wanted, in her own phrase, "to reach the Demos"; and it is possible that she did so. But the Demos did not respond sufficiently to cause her to break her rule a second time.

Here, then, is a very large body of poetic drama, engaged upon subjects drawn from the literature and the history of many countries and many epochs. How to arrive at the significance of a total so extensive and various? A coherent impression of it would be difficult in any case; and within these narrow limits it may well be impossible. There is, however, one helpful fact, for the tragedies divide themselves almost automatically into three groups. The division is, indeed, so simple as almost to be suspect, and so definite as almost to be mechanical. It corresponds, too, in the most approved manner, with the early, middle, and later periods of the poet's life. Thus there are, in progressive order from the beginning of her career, her English, Latin, and Eastern periods. The first deals with themes from Scottish chronicles and English history, and extends from 1881 to about 1890. In the second group, published from 1892 to 1903, the subjects are mainly drawn from Roman history; and the third, published from 1905 until the end, has for its outstanding features two plays of a projected trilogy from Josephus, another called *A Messiah*, and one which handles an Abyssinian love-tragedy.

Yet these categories are not quite so clear-cut, after all. One soon finds plays which do not correspond to the order to which they are supposed to belong, and discovers, on investigation, that they were not written in that order. But

one makes at the same time the much more satisfying discovery that there are, within each group, affinities which hold the plays by a stronger bond than the arbitrary likeness of theme. Thus in the English period, the stage of the poet's grave and strenuous youth, ideas are a motive force. This body of drama, if too dynamic to be 'high-brow,' may be justly defined as 'intellectual,' with a strange pouring of the new wine of modern thought into the old bottles of Elizabethan form. But with the approach of the Latin period the centre of power shifts from ideas to art. Form is now as important as, or more so than matter; and the two cannot be separated. The value of the work now is in its unity of beauty and truth. But when the last phase has come, and tragic vision has ranged far enough among the elements of its universe to make a final synthesis, it wheels back to close the cycle upon the idea of destiny. Vast passions are now the poet's theme. Destiny, consisting in some overmastering elemental force, is now her inspiration. But it is no external, supernatural, or superhuman force. It subsists in nature, and resides within humanity: it belongs inalienably to the stuff of which man is made: it is the tragic shadow of life itself.

Coming at once to the English group, it is amusing to find that this starts off with a Greek play! That is to say, the earliest work published by the poets as Michael Field, *Callirrhoë*, has a Greek theme. It is a fact which at first glance threatens to embarrass our nice clear categories; but we remember in time that there is something almost absurdly native in the familiar spectacle of a Greek subject in the hands of a young English poet. Of course! What else, what other, could one expect?—;at least down to the epoch of yesterday to which our poet belonged. Was not this dependence upon the classics largely responsible for the revolt of contemporary poets—;as witness Anna Wickham:

We are outwearied with Persephone,
Rather than her, we'll sing Reality.

The story of Callirrhoë comes from Pausanias; but our poet has modified the original by basing the motive of the plot upon the origin of the worship of Dionysos, which, as she admits, must have been much earlier. The anachronism is deliberate, however, and does not vitiate the theme, which is already un-Greek in its preoccupation with romantic passion. For Callirrhoë, a maiden of Calydon, is beloved to distraction by the Dionysiac priest Coresus. She loves him in return (or at least our poet makes us suspect so), but will not marry him because she cannot worship the new god. He thereupon calls down a curse upon her city, and the people begin to sicken and die of the plague. They send to consult the oracle at Dodona, and it is decreed that Callirrhoë must be sacrificed to Dionysos unless some one else will die in her stead. No one offers, however, and she goes to the altar prepared to die. Coresus makes ready to slay her, but when the moment comes to strike he kills himself instead of her. His sacrifice convinces Callirrhoë of the truth of his religion. Now that he is dead she realizes that she had loved him, and she kills herself as an offering to his god.

The play is a living work despite its ancient theme, its rather cumbrous machinery, and its mixed elements. But apart from certain passages of great imaginative beauty, its chief interest lies in the fact that its motives—;love, self-sacrifice, enthusiasm—;were the ruling motives of the poets' lives and a frequent theme of their art. Therein, of course, lies the significance of their modification of the old story. Love they always saw as the greatest good of life, self-sacrifice as the dearest end of life, and enthusiasm (here enters Dionysos) as the means to life's noblest expression. In this last element the work remains Greek, though Englished in so much else. Michael was, in that

sense, a Thracian born, and she had compelled a peace with Apollo. She infused the play with the spirit of Dionysiac worship because that spirit was her own. And when one remembers the spiritual truth that was implicit in the cult of Dionysos, its contribution to the world's growing belief in immortality, and its connexion with the origins of tragedy, there is peculiar appropriateness in such a subject for Michael Field's first essay in drama. Thus the key-pieces to the poet's meaning are found where Coresus is pleading with Callirrhoë for his love and his religion. He has begged her to join the Maenads' revel, and so set her spirit free; and he declares of his god:

> He came to bring
> Life, more abundant life, into a world
> That doled its joys as a starved city doles
> Its miserable scraps of mummying bread.
> He came to gladden and exalt, all such
> Must suffer....
> *Callirrhoë.* ... Of old the gods
> Gave culture by the harp, the helm, the plough,
> Not by the ivy-wand.
> *Coresus.* Seems it so strange
> That Semele's sublime audacity
> Should be the origin of life urbane?
> We must be fools; all art is ecstasy,
> All literature expression of intense
> Enthusiasm: be beside yourself.
> If a god violate your shrinking soul,
> Suffer sublimely.
> *Callirrhoë.* Yet I hold it true,
> Divinity oft comes with quiet foot.
> *Coresus.* To give a moment's counsel or to guard
> From instant peril. When a god forsakes
> Olympus to infuse divinity
> In man's mean soul, he must confound, incite,

O'erwhelm, intoxicate, break up fresh paths
To unremembered sympathies. Nay, more,
Accompany me further in my thought—;
Callirrhoë, I tell you there are hours
When the Hereafter comes and touches me
O' the cheek.

. . . . .

Callirrhoë. I tremble at your god, for terrible
In wrath I fear him; though you speak him fair.

. . . . .

Coresus. Turn not away, Callirrhoë; by goads
The ox-souled must be driven; yield response
To Heaven's desire of thee; love humanly.
Love is the frenzy that unfolds ourselves;
Before it seize us we are ignorant
Of our own power as reed-bed of the pipe.
The rushes sang not; from Pan's burning lips
Syrinx sucked music. Wert thou lute to love,
There were a new song of the heaven and earth.
Callirrhoë. ... I will not yield my love
To Bacchic priest....
Coresus. ... As unseasoned wood
That smokes and will not kindle is flung by
For any refuse purpose, while the train
Of torchlight sinuous winds among the hills,
A starry serpent, so art thou cast out,
An apathetic slave of commonplace,
Sluggish and irreceptive of true life,
From all high company of heavenly things.
Go to your home.

Callirrhoë. O, Heaven shelter it!

Act I, Scene 3

There is much that one would like to quote from this play, including the faun scenes (written by Henry) that have already been adopted into certain anthologies. Machaon, too, sceptic and humorist, might be used to confound the dullards who said that Michael Field had no humour. There is salt enough in him to give the whole tragedy another flavour, and he breaks at least one of the precious unities. His rationalism is away in a much colder region (he usually speaks in prose); and his conversion to the cult at the end is out of character. But though one may not linger on him, one must stop for a moment at Henry's faun song. For here, very delicately and quietly, a greater theme is stated. And if we seek in this first work for an early glimpse of the larger vision which the poets attained at last, seeing the tragic element of life as life's inescapable shadow, it will be found, quite unself-conscious, in this playful song.

I dance and dance! Another faun,
A black one, dances on the lawn.
He moves with me, and when I lift
My heels, his feet directly shift.
I can't out-dance him, though I try;
He dances nimbler than I.
I toss my head, and so does he;
What tricks he dares to play on me!
I touch the ivy in my hair;
Ivy he has and finger there.
The spiteful thing to mock me so!
I will out-dance him! Ho! Ho! Ho!

Act III, Scene 6

Fair Rosamund, which appeared in the same volume with *Callirrhoë*, possesses equal dramatic power with greater control and a clearer sense of direction. The play is built with more economy; the movement is quicker, and the lyrical passages really belong to the setting and are not

simply interludes to provide relief. Of the works of the first group, *Fair Rosamund* is perhaps the most perfect artistically, which may have been the reason why the poets chose it for reproduction in the Vale Press. But just because it is so balanced, and entirely free from afterthought, it is not fully typical of this group. We pass it, therefore, with two short quotations, and in addition only this fragment from Rosamund's farewell to the King, to illustrate how our poet will sometimes gather infinity into a gem-like phrase:

Dear, my lord,
There are some thoughts
That through this stormy weather of my soul
Cannot now travel toward you.
Act II, Scene 5

In Act I, Scene 3, spies have just informed Queen Elinor of the King's love for Rosamund, and of the place where he has hidden her:

Q. Elinor. Thank God for boys!
To have reared a treasonous brood from his own blood,
To have it at my call!

[*To the King, who has entered.*

I tell you to your face, that boy of ours,
Crowned Henry, has my love, because he has
My bridegroom's eyes; but for the rest, my lord,
You're old to think of love: when you were young
You thought not of it.

K. Henry. I embraced your lands,
Not you.

Q. Elinor. Plantagenet, you wronged yourself

As you had made the day and night your foe,
And roused
The violated seasons to confer
Each his peculiar catastrophe
Of death or pestilence.—;*Embraced my lands!*
I'll shatter you
As Nature shatters—;you as impotent
As the uprooted tree to lash the earth....
Embraced my lands.—;Ah, I forget myself,
The loveless are insensate to presage;
'Tis in calamity's harsh stubble-field
They learn to suffer. I'll be harvester,
And sickle your ripe joys.

The last scene is in Rosamund's room at Woodstock. It is night, and she is waiting for the King. But Queen Elinor has found the clue to the labyrinth, and is at this moment approaching the secret bower, intent upon killing her rival:

Rosamund. White moon, art thou the only visitant?
Thou lookst like death!
Dost glisten through the trees
My Henry bows his plumes to in the gloom?
He comes to-night; for good Sir Topaz said,
"My lady, put you on the crimson gown
The King had wrought for you, and ask no more,
But trust an old man's word.
And be you ready." It's a silver night;
I'll put me out apparel. How blood red
Burn the dark folds! I cannot put it on;
And yet I will. My lute; what is't I want—;
God, or the King?

[*Sings.*

Love doth never know
Why it is beloved,

And to ask were treason;
  Let the wonder grow!
Were its hopes removed,
  Were itself disproved
    By cold reason,
In its happy season,
  Love would be beloved.

No; it hurts sharper. I must just sit down
On the edge of the bed, and comb my hair and wait—;

. . . . .

I cannot think at all. How beautiful
This gold made silver in the moonlight! What!
Would Heaven age me for my Love? Let's look
In the mirror. Rosamund, you're worshipful.
    [*Starting back.*] 'Tis thus,
Even thus, he swore that he should come to me.
His very words! The prophecy's fulfilled,—;
I'll comb my hair down to my very feet.
A step!—;my heart, some patience. Henry, speak;
Bid it take courage! [*Enter Elinor.*] God! the Queen!

Q. Elinor. The Queen, who'll give you access to your
    God;
The wife, who'll doom the leman.
Act II, Scene 8

But coming now to the plays which are completely representative of the poets in this period, we may glance at *The Father's Tragedy*, *William Rufus*, *Canute the Great*, *The Cup of Water*, and *The Tragic Mary*. These, with three others, appeared within the dates 1885 and 1890—;not a poor record of five years' work, and one which reminds us that our poets laboured at their art as only the genuine artist does. They drew the themes of these plays mainly

from English history and Scottish chronicles; and they selected them, all except that of *The Tragic Mary*, ultimately for an idea that lay behind them. Obviously, therefore, this work is not entirely disinterested art: it anticipates, to that extent, the problem-play, the intellectual drama, and even (so far as concerns his influence in this country) Ibsen. Indeed, a remarkable aspect of the group is the way in which, despite its romantic tone and its Elizabethan form, it yet foreshadows the movement that English drama was about to make toward a 'realistic' presentment of life. There may be a piquancy in thinking of Michael Field the romantic as the forerunner of Mr Bernard Shaw and Mr John Galsworthy: and it is not certain which would be the less pleased at the comparison, ancestress or descendants. The latter, following a poetic age with inevitable comedy—;inevitable if only from reaction—;were compelled to decline upon prose as their medium; and the great merit of Michael Field is that, belonging to the poetic age and possessed of the poet's ardour and imagination, she yet kept near enough to the actual world to see the evils that existed there. Happily removed from them by circumstance and temperament, she yet kept her eyes clear and her sympathies alert. Her prologue to *The Father's Tragedy* is apt to this point, for there she warns

> the light and easy-souled
> Who shun the joyless truth in human things

to turn to more congenial pages than her tragedies. It is evident that she was concerned, thus early, with the *joyless truth* which was to take possession—;absolute and somewhat depressing possession—;of the dramatists who came after her. Unlike them, however, by giving her truth the form of poetry she endowed it with the joyousness of art. She saw it, too, in the round: there is a largeness in her conception of it which gives her 'intellectual drama'

greater dignity, and one would suppose greater permanence, than later 'realistic' work. Yet when one observes the ideas that govern some of her plays in this kind—;parental tyranny, the land question, marriage, or the conflict between an older and a newer order of civilization —;one recognizes at once the likeness to the motives of much more recent drama. Indeed, we might go further and demonstrate a rather later play—;*Attila*—;as an anticipation of Freud and the psycho-analysts.

The Father's Tragedy, a play in five acts and a great many scenes, was written almost entirely by the younger of the two poets. Some parts of it were composed by her at the age of sixteen, and were in fact the means by which Michael discovered her dramatic talent. At the date of its publication (1885) Henry was only twenty-three, and it had been completed some months before. The play is, therefore, the work of a very young mind, and one is not surprised that its main feature is a vigorous and sympathetic study of youth. What does surprise one, however, is that the study of age in this struggle between a father and a son is also sympathetic; and although it is the son who is the victim of the father, the play is called, significantly, the *father's* tragedy. Which is to say that the profoundest depth of the tragedy is seen to be the moral defeat (one ought rather to say the moral annihilation) of the father. That is a conception not so youthful, perhaps, as the age of the author; just as the fierce dark strength of the drama would not appear to accord with her sex. There is something Brontesque in the sombre power of this tragedy; something too much of horror, barely relieved by two or three short scenes of hectic gaiety when the young prince has escaped temporarily to his boon companions. But only imagination of the highest kind could have conceived it.

The plot comes from *Scotichronicon* and the old chronicler Wyntoun, whose words are in one place almost exactly quoted. Robert III is shown to be pious, weak,

superstitious, affectionate, desiring only the 'good' of his heir, the young Prince David, Duke of Rothsay. But David, intensely alive in his buoyant young manhood, loathes the dour 'good' that is forced upon him, and combats it. He has, in fact, more strength than his father, and the struggle becomes bitter and tragic only when Albany, the King's brother, backs the King with a strength equal to David's own, overbears the father's weakness and perverts his affection, and eventually compasses the Prince's death. The crisis is the enforced marriage of David to a bride whom he detests, he having been literally sold to her father as the highest bidder for a great match. He breaks into the council-chamber at the moment when the King and Albany are settling the price that the bride is to pay for him. Albany bids him be seated.

Rothsay. In the market-place
Slaves stand for sale. I will not sit; I'll stand
In purchasable shame before you all
Who bargain for my manhood; stand and watch
My father sell the birthright of my flesh;
Yea, stand and bear a sacrilege my youth
Must damn itself to credit.

King. David, peace!

. . . . .

Rothsay. Nothing glorious
Is marketable—;fame, nor love, nor deeds
Of any virtue, youth nor happiness;
Nothing, oh nothing, but the meanest things,
Of which I am the meanest. On my soul,
You drag me in the dirt, and there I'll lie
And dash it in your faces....

Albany. Wherefore all this noise

And rampant passion? We would understand
The tossing cause thereof.

Rothsay. Speak it! Oh no!
'Twould want an old and worldly merchant, one
Who has a counting-house. I'm still a prince
About the lips, nor know your tricks with coin,
Your sales of man for woman, your low truck
And miserable frauds. You've ruined me,
And thrown my youth down to the bottom step
Of Pride's high stairs. I'll never climb again.

. . . . .

Oh, write your contract, for it joins my life
To snaky-headed Sin, in whose hot breast
I'll know what pleasure is. Call forth your priest—;
He's but a pander in the guise of Heaven.
Let Hymen's torches flare—;they smell of pitch
And sulph'rous fever of contemn'd desire;
Ring from your steeples—;'tis the curfew-bell;
Prepare your bridal-veil—;'tis hiding night;
Present your hateful bride to pulseless arms—;
And Lust receives the harlot in its clasp.

Act I, Scene 3

Rothsay. Oh, all the shame
You've struck into my being will be there,
When it is opened to its secret depth
Before the Judgment seat, and lo! old men
Will answer for the sins that they have done
Across the years to those in backward Time's
Most lovely season.

Act II, Scene 2

The scenes in Act IV, when Rothsay is starving to death in Falkland Castle, are vividly imagined:

Rothsay. I can only think
Of bread, bread, bread!...
... Oh, without
Are many cornfields—;and the river! God!
I scarcely can remember anything
But the white floods, and the last scrap of meat
I emptied from my wallet.

. . . . .

I ever thought
Death was a shadow.—;I myself am Death.
I fed and never knew it: now I starve.
Here is the skeleton I've seen in books!
'Tis I—;the knarled and empty bones. Here—;Here—;
The grinning dints! I thought Death anywhere
But near my life; and it is in the pith
And centre of my body. Horrible!

Act IV, Scene 2

King Robert does not know that David is dying, and the tragic irony of Scene 5 of this act is masterly. It is a wild night, and the King, crouching over the fire of a room high up in the castle, hears the wind shriek outside and thinks of his boy, whom he believes to be merely shut up like a naughty child to recover from his rage:

K. Robert. My poor lad,
My David, who is fearful of the dark,
Would he were here this bleak and scolding night!
He used to throw a cushion on the floor,
And lay him down as featly as the hound,
His foolish yellow head against my knee;
And so he'd laugh and chat and sing old songs,
Or gaily sneer at our last grave debate,
Drop sudden crude suggestions that anon
Our older counsel ripened into act;

Until for some light word I'd give rebuke,
When either with a peal of raillery
He'd toss me back a penitent bright face,
Or with a shaded humour spring apart,
No place from me too far. Good Albany,
You would not have our Rothsay longer shut
In such grim-tempered darkness?

Act IV, Scene 5

William Rufus (1885), a full-dress drama of five acts, is without a woman character. It is based on Freeman's history of Rufus, and was suggested to the poet, as she explains in the preface, by a visit to the New Forest. There she found the stone which marks the spot where Rufus fell, pierced by an arrow glancing from an oak, "as if directed," to use her own phrase, "by Nature's anger at the destruction of her food-bearing fields for the insolence of pleasure."

So there, again, peeps out the ulterior motive. The idea of the play is explicitly to be the land question; and that it had, in fact, a political bearing is confirmed by the poet's letters on the subject. Yet one is glad to discover, as we quickly do, that here as elsewhere in her intellectual drama Michael Field has been better than her creed: her dramatic instinct has subdued the idea to itself. So that, if we had no other evidence than that of the play, we should be convinced that the idea grew out of the theme, and was not imposed upon it. It was never a case of the poets' exclaiming, "Go to, we will write a problem-play!" but rather of a sudden perception, in their travels or their reading, "What a subject for drama!" and then, as an afterthought, "And see what profound significance!" But as a fact all the evidence points in the same direction: a character would arrest them, they would be attracted by its story, would absorb themselves in the study of it, and become literally possessed by it—;working out the implicit

idea as something subsidiary.

In this play the idea is completely assimilated to imagination. There is no bald presentation of it on the plane of everyday existence, for that surely is a function of comedy. And though the King's cruelty in appropriating the peasants' land is shown in its effect upon the lives of individuals, a larger vision of the problem is presented in the figure of one old man, Beowulf, who is, as it were, the wronged spirit of the Earth in human shape. In him the idea is made both concrete and spiritual, as the genius of poetry can make it. He is a very real, rough-hewn old countryman, with a vigorous part in the movement of the drama; and yet there is a touch upon him that is weird and supernatural, which relates him to fierce elemental forces and makes him at one and the same time a rustic and an avenging deity. He is blind; his eyes were put out long ago for trespass; and he feels his way to the gallows where the body of his grandson has now been hanged for killing a deer:

Beowulf. I feel it's here; I have no need to see.
I'm glad they murdered him, not made him dark;
For now he's dead the Earth will think on him
As she unweaves his body bit by bit.
She'll have time like the women-folk at work
To turn all over in her mind, and get
His wrongs by heart.
... Who is here?

Wilfrith. Wilfrith! I often come to pray for him!...

Beowulf. Pray! Pray! Are you a wench to chatter so?
Does not your tongue grow rigid in your head,
A corpse to bear that silence company?
Have you no death in you? Oh, say your prayers;
I will keep mourning in my ruined ears
The passing of his voice.

Act II, Scene 1

Beowulf. Do you think the Earth's a thing that makes
your flesh
Soft for the worms?—;the harvests lie asleep
Upon her bosom; she has reared the spring;
The seasons are her change of countenance;
She lives, and now for many thousand years
Hath ruled the toiling and the rest of men.
... She'll judge.

Old Man. Do thou make known this matter to the
Lord;
He will avenge.

Beowulf. The Lord! Oh, He's above!
There's something lying at the roots of things
I burrow for.

Act IV, Scene 1

Beowulf [*his last speech, after Rufus has been killed*]. Yea, bear him through the woods like a gashed boar,
Present him dripping to your angry God;
He may not be implacable. In haste
Cloak the foul thing beneath the minster tower;
Heap soil on him....
... There are worms
About his darkness; I am satisfied.

End of Act V

The people of this drama are vigorous creatures, as sharply drawn and clear-cut as types, but very far from the merely typical. The poet has created, and not constructed, them; and each one possesses his own soul. Rufus is a credible villain, a man and not a monster. He can melt at the sight of filial piety, unbend to a jest, warm to affection.

Anselm may stand as a figure which shall represent the insulted Church, but he is a very holy and gentle old priest. Philosopher and saint, he was, of course, historically studied; but he is, despite verisimilitude, an almost complete embodiment of the two qualities of our poet's mind which make so rare a combination—;her religious temper and her philosophic intellect. Two short quotations from him may help to illustrate this:

Anselm. God gives His bread to children who are sweet
With golden faith; to thinkers and to men
Of striving reason He presents a stone.
. . . . .
Faith is the child's gift, and Philosophy
The man's achievement. Blessèd toil, to walk
Where babes are carried past on angel-wings.
... It is Philosophy
That knocks at Heaven's gate: Faith finds the door
Wide open.

Act II, Scene 2

But of all the characters, one supposes Leofric to have engaged the poets' affection most. He is a 'mason': which is to say he is the architect, sculptor, and builder all in one who was the medieval artist. It is evident that the poets had particular joy in imagining him, absorbed and happy in his real world of art, with the actual world as mere stuff for his modelling. If Leofric ever allows himself to be disturbed by the King's greedy inroads, it is from no 'political' reason, but simply that the noisy hunters make such havoc of the woodland peace:

Leofric. ... A horn!
Methinks the forest hath another use
These precious hours of morning, when the world
Is at some process of its perfecting
'Twere well to learn the trick of. Wilfrith toils,

Tearing yon fibre from the ground a-sweat
With effort; while for me!—;my eyes are full;
I have no want; the world is excellent;
There is no prickle in the holly wrong.
How bossily it clusters!
... Oh do not think
We travel so untreasured in resource
We needs must earn the bread of every joy
By sweat of soul. If life's a desert—;Ah!
There's manna in the waste; it lies about,
And the wise idle soul is satisfied.

Act I, Scene 4

The motive of *Canute the Great* (1887) presents a curious difficulty. For if we are to accept the poet's own statement of what she meant by the play (and it does seem as if she ought to have known), then we are forced to conclude that she attempted the impossible, and therefore failed. But one has the suspicion that she did *not* quite know what she meant by it—;which is not so impertinent as it sounds, and only means that her artistic instinct was stronger and truer in this case than her philosophy. For in the preface she declares that she is here dealing with the theory of evolution; and she elaborates an idea which, had it really operated as a motive force, would surely have paralysed her Muse and struck it dumb. Canute, however, is no paralytic: on the contrary, he has his creator's vehement life and passion, at least for the first half of the drama. But in those scenes he is far enough from any abstract theory. Yet when his vitality flags, as it does sometimes, and when the play becomes, as a consequence, to that extent unsuccessful, the cause lies in a certain resemblance which the theme does bear to the poet's definition of it. For it is possible to regard the character of Canute in the abstract as a transition between two ages and a link between two orders of civilization. That is, of

course, the meaning which the poet saw in it—;when she was writing her preface. But in the process of making the drama the wise æsthetic impulse seized and worked upon something simpler, more definite, and more moving—;the potential conflict that exists everywhere and always among human creatures between their instincts and their reason. That, surely, is a tragic motive of universal validity; and it may precipitate at any moment, and at any stage of civilization, the revolt of the half-tamed instincts which is true stuff of tragedy, whether it be enacted within the small orbit of an individual soul or in the insane immensity of a world-war. So long as Canute is at grips with the rebel powers—;dramatized in his struggle with Edmund—;he is a great dramatic figure; but when his creator raises the conflict—;with his penitence for Edmund's death—;to the plane of pure thought, the life goes out of him and he becomes but a type, though a very noble one, of spiritual struggle. Even at those moments, however, one may find passages where the æsthetic sense has subdued theory to itself with fine effect. Thus the poet has touched Canute's love for Emma with symbolism, seeing her as the gentler and riper civilization into which Canute is adopted; and again, the wild Northern land of his origin, the elements which went to the making of his race, the secret compulsive urge of heredity, are embodied in the figure of a weird prophetess who is to him his other self, the incarnate spirit of those ancient forces. The speech which follows is made by Canute when he is recalling his first meeting with Emma. There are passages with her, love-scenes between the young sea-king and the mature queen, which are adroitly and boldly handled, and are drama in essence and in fact. But here, in a reverie, is the poet's opportunity for putting her theory into a symbol:

Canute. ... Above me bent
A sweet, soft-shouldered woman, with supreme,

Abashing eyes, and such maturity—;
The perfect flower of years—;such June of face....
So ceremonious, and yet so fearless
In passionate grace, that I was struck with shame,
And knew not where I was, nor how to speak,
Confounded to the heart. She made me feel
That I was lawless and uncivilised,—;
Barbarian! In all my brave array
I shrank from her, as she had caught me stripped
For some brute pastime. Is this womanhood?
There's more to see each time one looks at her,
There's music in her; she has listened much,
Pored o'er the lustrous missals, learnt how soft
One speaks to God....

Act I, Scene 4

Another and more powerful example of our poet's genius for giving form to the abstract, and triumphing dramatically over a most stubborn theory, is in her creation of Gunhild, the Scandinavian prophetess. Gunhild is something more than a symbol—;though she is that, and stands for ancestry, the ancient gods, and the wild fight with nature of the barbaric order which Canute is renouncing. But she is, besides, a terrifying old witch: an ugly, clinging creature who will not be cast off. She enters to Canute just at the moment when he is thinking of Emma:

Canute [to Hardegon]. Whom hast thou brought?
A brooding face, with windy sea of hair,
And eyes whose ample vision ebbs no more
Than waters from a fiord. I conceive
A dread of things familiar as she breathes.

Gunhild. O King.

Canute. Ay, Scandinavia.

Gunhild. He sees
How with a country's might I cross his door;
How in me all his youth was spent, in me
His ancestors are buried; on my brows
Inscribed is his religion; through my frame
Press the great, goading forces of the waves.

Canute. Art thou a woman?

Gunhild. Not to thee. I am
Thy past.

Canute. Her arms are knotted in her bosom
Like ivy stems. What does she here, so fixed
Before my seat?

. . . . .

Gunhild. Hearken!... All eve I stood
And gathered in your fate. You raise your hands
To other gods, you speak another tongue,
You learn strange things on which is Odin's seal
That men should know them not, you cast the billows
Behind your back, and leap upon the horse.
You love no more the North that fashioned you,
The ancestors whose blood is in your heart—;
These things you have forgotten.

Canute. Yes.

Gunhild. But they
Will have a longer memory.

. . . . .

... Oh, indestructible
Are the first bonds of living. Fare thee well.
Thou wilt engender thine own ancestry;
Nature will have her permanence.

Canute. And I

Will have my impulse.

Gunhild. Oh, the blue fir-bough,
The bird, the fern, and iris at my feet!
The whole world talks of birth, it is the secret
That shudders through all sap. [*Exit.*

Act I, Scene 4

In illustrating poetic drama, one chooses inevitably such passages as these, where poetic imagination is concentrated at high power. But they, by their nature, cannot represent the suppler and swifter dramatic qualities of this poetry. And they do no more than hint at what is, in our poet, a very great gift—;psychological insight flashing into expression as vivid and as true as itself. It is well-nigh impossible to illustrate this by quotation, because the effect is cumulative. The phrase which darts into the mind is full of what the mind already holds, but which was dark and inchoate until the flash came. One or two minor examples may be given from this play, as when Edric (conceived by the poet as entirely base) is sounding Canute on the subject of a marriage with Emma:

Canute. I have no doubt
But I shall marry.

Edric. Where's the wife to match
An eagle of your plumage?

Canute. All the world
Is full of stately women.

Edric. I have seen
But one, the late king's widow. She is prime
Among all dames.

Canute. You think that you have seen her,

Because you know she has a radiant skin,
And strange, proud eyes!

And again, when Edric asks for some message, a "sugared speech" to take to Emma:

Canute [*aside*]. The fool!
I cannot speak.—;Take her my silence, Thane.

Act I, Scene 4

The Cup of Water, published in the same volume with *Canute*, is an idyll whose delicate beauty one almost fears to touch. That it too astonishingly carries a problem one would hardly guess; and even in face of the poet's confession of the fact, and her anxiety lest the problem should be misunderstood, one would demur that here again her practice has been better than her precept. For these exquisite love-scenes, these magnanimous friends and lovers, and this clear greatness of thought issuing simply in noble action might bear some relation to a 'marriage question' in Utopia, but would have little enough to do with such a problem in the actual world. That, however, is rather a cause for rejoicing to those who can delight in the ideal beauty of the work, and who can see in its ethical audacity an innocence which only could dare to follow up so boldly a logical attack upon the conventions of morality.

The theme was adopted from a projected poem of Dante Gabriel Rossetti; but in taking it over our poet has moralized it far from its origin. The story as she tells it is concerned with the love of a young king, Almund, for a peasant-girl, his renunciation of her from motives of loyalty, and his ultimate discovery that in giving her up he has sinned against something in her and in himself which has a deeper sanction than loyalty—;that, in a word, fulfilment is a higher good than renunciation. But this he finds out too late:

Almund. I shall find
All the great years of Hell inadequate
To mourn this mighty error and defeat—;
To put such gift away, and youth and manhood
Stirring within me! *Act III, Scene 2*

. . . . .

Oh, we must learn
To drink life's pleasures if we would be pure,
Deep, holy draughts.... *Act III, Scene 2*

. . . . .

Love, Love, Love,
Without which we are made of the mere clay
Of the world's agèd floor. *Act II, Scene 1*

In the first scene the King and his friend Hubert have encountered Cara in the forest, and have begged of her a drink of water. She does not know them, and is unconscious that both are enchanted by her wild prettiness. She fills her cup with water, and brings it straight to Almund, though Hubert teasingly tries to intercept it; and the King desires her to serve his friend first. The merest touches put us in possession of the tragic knot—;that both of the young men love her and that she loves Almund; but that he, in the moment of realizing his passion, feels upon him the bonds of honour to his betrothed wife and loyalty to his friend. As they ride away, his mind is full of the conflict:

Almund [*aside*]. She is mine.
The water came not straighter from the earth,
Than she herself to me.

Hubert. You are unmindful.
I vainly prate to one in reverie—;
Indifferent to my fortune.

Almund. May you win her!

You are my friend.

Hubert. I doubt not she will listen;
The small, cold cheek grew ruddy. We shall wed,
When you espouse your Millicent.

Almund [*aside*]. Thus God
Severs, without the clemency of death.

Act I, Scene 1

Scene 2 proceeds to Hubert's wooing of Cara, whom he seeks next day in the forest. But her thoughts are far away from him:

Hubert. Oh, now I know there is *for ever*
To make room for such loving.

Cara. Do you think
That he can love like that?

Hubert. You mean the king?

Cara. No, not the king. My lover is a man
Who tells me he is thirsty....

Hubert tries to make her understand the facts: that the King is betrothed already, and that he cannot therefore love her.

Cara. ... He is mine;
A thief has hold of him, my own, my own,
My king, my love, my love!

Hubert. He never was,
Never will be your love.... The king would laugh
To hear you chirp such folly.

Cara. It's more wicked
Than anything that's done....
And it is such a lie! The king would laugh?
He had a still, grave face; I am quite sure
That he would never laugh at anything
So terrible and sudden. Why, the oak
Has a white, bony bough amid the leaves;
That's where the lightning struck. I do not laugh,
I think what it must suffer 'neath the green,
So scathed and ugly.

Hubert. Cara, do not put
Such hatred in your eyes; if the great lady
Who loves the king—;

Cara. Great ladies cannot love.
You must be poor and famished to be hungry.
. . . . .
If you meet him,
Oh, tell him I am his, a weary child,
Tired out since yesterday.

[*Exit Hubert mournfully.*

I'll go along
The wood, and say it over to myself,
He cannot, cannot love me; but I know
Deep in my heart he does. There was a gift—;
The king had something for me in his eyes;
And when he waved good-bye ... I am quitesure
God made him for me: he will come again.

The Tragic Mary (1890) returns to chronicles for its subject, and belongs to our first category for that reason only. It has no specifically intellectual theme, and for its tragic motive should rather be classed in the third group of dramas, where "passions spin the plot." Not that the poet

has neglected the element of fatal circumstance in Mary's life, nor the very intricate machinery of action in which she was involved. The incidence of political intrigue, domestic plot, and religious feud is clearly shown, and their mere data are used to carry forward the brisk movement of the play. The Marian legend is, in fact, handled boldly; some of the blackest charges against the Queen are confronted, even those on which the historian has pronounced that there is no evidence. But the whole tragedy is seen in its relation to character, with Mary as the centre and source of it, not merely because she is a beautiful queen precariously enthroned among false enemies and falser friends, but because she carries in her nature the seed of tragedy. Admirable balance is kept in picking a path through the mazy inconsistencies of the old story: neither extreme of antithetical judgment is adopted. And if Michael Field has not plucked out the heart of Mary Stuart's mystery, she has at least brought it out of the region of the incredible. Her Mary is human: of such vivid humanity, indeed, as to draw for that reason the lightnings of fate. She is a richly dowered nature, capable of intense love and fierce anger and deep tenderness, free and frank to the world's measure of indiscretion, sensitive, eager, and responsive to the world's measure of excess; and of clemency wide enough for the silly and the cynical to ban as complaisance. She has a swift, gay temper; but underneath the flashing faults of incaution and a rapier wit there lies an innocence which is from its nature incapable of suspecting evil in others, or of calculating beforehand how her ardour and friendliness would appear to meaner eyes. She is, in short, an imperfect but large-hearted human creature; and she discovers that to be one inch greater than a small world is to draw inevitably, if not the bolts of Jove, at any rate the slings and arrows of a punier race.

It is, however, in comprehending Mary Stuart's womanhood and its bearing upon the tragedy that this

study by a woman poet may claim its proper value. No Cleopatra this: no male apprehension of femininity as sheer sex-impulse. Mary's love of loving and of being loved is shown to be profound and instinctive, an impulse to give, to cherish, and to bless which every normal woman shares in some degree. Michael Field has seen it for the complex and subtle power it is, and not merely as a lure to attract a lover. Raised as it is, in Mary Stuart, to the measure of her human stature—;the range of her sympathies, the keenness of her perception, her gift of understanding, the goodwill that prompts her clear intimacy of approach—;it is a power that becomes a danger in a circle which could not rise to the same height. But it was a danger primarily to herself: she was its chief victim.

"Terrible in love: no compromise between ecstasy and death," says one of her Maries; and another, speaking of her manner to those she deems her friends, that she is "fond and familiar"; while a third declares of her sympathy and insight, "There is not a balmy nook of one's soul undiscovered of her." Thus, too, after she has dismissed Bothwell, indignant at his proposal of marriage so soon after Darnley's death, her anger ebbs as she remembers how *natural it seems to hear the man's love in his voice*. And on another occasion, when she is thinking of him after Darnley has deserted her:

... It was for courtesy
I stooped and let Lord Bothwell kiss my hands,
For sweet to me is love in human eyes,
As daylight to the world.

Act III, Scene 1

One observes, too, how the feminine author has perceived the incidence of the feminine instinct of self-accusal on Mary's tragedy, arriving by intuition at a truth

of psychology which the mental doctors declare to be invariable. To a sensitive nature that instinct will often give the colour of guilt, or will at least render disavowal impotent. Thus the ancient lie attributing complicity in Darnley's murder credibly takes its rise in an access of remorse for an imagined sin—;as when Mary, in the shock of the news of Darnley's death, remembers how she had once wished him such an evil fate, on the night that he murdered David Riccio:

... Heaven has crept
Into my ancient thoughts, and done the deed,
I, David,—;I half-prompted in my prayers,
When I besought God's pity on your soul.
I am a guilty woman....
Act III, Scene 7

And again, when she is thinking of Bothwell's wooing and her growing love for him:

I never shall grow holy among men,
And yet I wish them ever good, not evil,
And long to give them pleasure of such portion
Of wit or beauty as were made my dower.

It is significant, too, that Mary's motherhood is seen to be a deep force in her, and therefore in the tragedy. She is found to be an instinctive mother, not only in the primary fact of rejoicing to bear a child, but in a profound sense of the value of life and an urgent impulse to protect it. Hence the supreme villainy of David Riccio's murder is seen by our poet to lie in the fact that he is struck down in Mary's presence, and desperately clinging to her for help, when she is within a few weeks of the birth of her child. And this by the husband whose sacred duty was to protect her. That is perceived to be Darnley's unpardonable sin, and it prepares for much that follows. But observe how the poet

has indicated the greatness of a mother-instinct which leaps to parry even a shattering blow like this. Mary sees that she is hemmed in by plots, that her life is in danger; and she makes a swift plan to escape through the vaults of the ruined Abbey of Holyrood. But it is a daunting project:

... If I were struck stone-dead
For horror at the grim, distorted tombs;
If I should bring forth a strange, spectral child,
To catch the bats that flit from roof to roof,
And wink at daylight! God, it shall not be!
For I will nurse him royally with my soft,
Wild, wayward songs, and he shall lie and laugh
Across my knees, until the happy tune
Drop off into a drowse.

Act I, Scene 3

There is much to illustrate this aspect of Mary's womanhood; but one other short quotation must suffice. It is after the birth of her son, and she has forgiven and reinstated Darnley. Lethington has presented another petition to her, and she replies:

I live now but to pardon and make peace,
I am a mother.

Technically, the drama must, of course, be considered as a chronicle-play; and this cancels a criticism which might otherwise hold, that the end of the play, when Mary gives herself up and Bothwell flees, is weak. But the five acts go with a swing till that point is reached, and the energy of movement gets into the verse. That is often vehement to the measure of the vehement passions it expresses; and the relief of a character like Lethington, ironical, subtle, sceptical of the whole world but the innocence of his queen, is proportioned to the emotional intensity of the play as a whole. Bothwell is a finely contrasted study,

compelling our belief in his lawless force, and in his mere physical reaction to Mary's influence. His psychology, true as hers, chimes responsive to the masculine instinct of resentment in moments of mental crisis: when passion pulls fate down upon him, he is, in his angry conviction, the wronged one, and wronged by the woman. Thus Mary, to him, is a temptress love,

The infamous soft creature with her sighs,
Her innocence and wonder!

and he has been damned by her love. There is a scene between Bothwell and his wife, Jane Gordon, which is good in itself for its dramatic truth and its utility in the action, but which has the further interest of revealing the Queen as she looks through such different eyes. In Mary's womanhood, seen thus from perhaps a dozen different angles, there is in truth an "infinite variety," no gusty variation on the single theme of passion.

In Act III, Scene 2, Jane Gordon has consented to release Bothwell from his marriage with her, so that he may win the Queen:

Bothwell. It is a desperate scheme!
How cold, and yet how kindly, are your eyes.
I never hate you—;her I often hate.

Lady Bothwell. Poor lady, for you love her! I have been
More fortunate in winning your respect.
You are a gallant fellow; but too wild
For the great fireside virtues....

Bothwell tries to make his wife divulge what are Mary's feelings toward him:

Lady Bothwell. For her sake
I am unknitting, James, our marriage-bond;

I shall not then report her. At your feet
The gown of Spanish fur I recognize
As her own mother's wear. She loved her mother;
She would not part with that except to one
She trusted with a child's simplicity.
Prove worthy of her faith. [*Exit.*

. . . . .

Bothwell. Fie, this woman
Leaves me with branded cheeks. To bid her
pack; To break up house, to get myself divorced
From one so noble and so tolerant
Just for a giddy hope!—;Ho, Paris,
put This trumpery away. [*Kicking the Spanish fur.*]
I must to-morrow
Betimes conduct the queen
to Callander.

Act III, Scene 2

Contrast the way in which Lethington—;scholar, wit, and statesman—;reacts to Mary's character. There is a scene with him when the Queen is in the deepest gulf, her courage broken by treachery, her love for Bothwell humiliated, her life so netted in intrigue that she is helpless and despairing. With almost every soul about her counsels proved false, she still believes in Lethington, and he is in truth her friend. But he, with his itch for policy, had given his support long ago to the Bothwell conspiracy against Darnley, believing in good faith that it might help the Queen. Now the Bothwell marriage has proved disastrous: the people are in revolt, and Mary is accused of hideous crimes that she cannot refute. She turns for advice to the one man whose wisdom and whose honour she believes that she can trust; and Bothwell, enraged and brutally jealous, breaks upon their conference:

Bothwell. ... Since you thwart me
And magnify this pard—;I will unfold
The smooth and cowardly creature you esteem.
This man heard Morton promise me your hand,
And to and fro he journeyed prospering
My heady plans; he is the sorcerer
To lure your mates to death, one after one;
He sits, and sees them drop away from you,
But yet he meddles not. Now chat together;
He will advise you how you may entoil
A second victim. I will leave you now. [*Exit.*

Queen. To think that you were with me at Dunbar!

Lethington. You saved my life.

Queen [*looking toward the door*]. He cannot be a king;
They wither, or are murdered, or grow mad
Who link themselves with me in sovereignty.
Twilight and ruin settle on us both!
Oh, might we be forgotten; could we lie
In the blank pardon of oblivion! That,
Alack, can never be; there is no man
Can give me safety, or protection, or
Peace from vicissitude; I have no lover,
Servant or friend; and yet I am beloved
Even to marvel. I can pray no more,
I have no more dependence upon God;
And none on any of His creatures, none.
Go, tell my story as you learnt it, add
New matter. If I sat beside the fire
In prison with my maids, and never spoke,
While you put forth fresh libels, or confirmed
The common talk, you could not injure me:
My silence would have privilege.
. . . . .
Lethington. Libellers

Are sure of popularity. My brain
Treasures a rare, untarnished miniature.
With that I shall not part. [*She gazes at him, sobbing.*] Nay,
pardon now,
Full pardon, great, obliterating sea
Of love o'erwhelm me! You have heaven's own measure:
The seventy-times-and-seven is in your eyes,
Immeasurable grace....
God shield you from dishonour! May He draw
Blood of me, when my life has other use
Than to protect your titles.

Act V, Scene 3

IV. THE TRAGEDIES—;II

MICHAEL FIELD'S second dramatic period synchronizes almost exactly with the 'eighteen-nineties.' That is to say, it was contemporaneous with Wilde, Beardsley, and *The Yellow Book*, and belonged in time to that decadent decade which has gained its reproachful title mainly because work like that of our poet was ignored, and eyes were drawn exclusively to the swagger of a noisier set. In all that clamour there was hardly a word uttered about her, though a stray reviewer here and there tried vainly to rouse the literary world to the fact that it had in its midst a veritable dramatic poet.

The seven plays came out one by one and passed quietly into the hands of the very few—;book-lovers or poetry-lovers—;who really cared for fine work. And nothing more was heard of them or their authors. Of the noisier and naughtier set a good deal was heard; and yet it may be that in the last judgment of literary values these seven plays will go far to redeem their epoch, vicariously, from a reproach too lightly made.

This poet and her work are in truth far enough removed from decadence. A heroic temper was hers, and mental courage, rare in her day, to face and present the problems of life. A robust and militant morality—;no less moral because it sometimes shatters indignantly a mere moral convention—;informs her drama. She did not belong to any set, and was so far from swagger that her idea of advertisement was to print at the end of her books the bad as well as the good reviews. She lived secluded in the suburb of a great town, and there she laboured, with no hope of reward, at her daily toil in the service of poetry. Nevertheless, even so far withdrawn, the spirit of the age reached her and laid its mark upon her work. And that, ultimately, is the reason why this drama of the second period reveals itself, despite a continued sense of moral and spiritual problems, as drama in which Art is the primary value. If ever artist wrought, as some devout lover, for the sake of Art, it was Michael Field in this body of work; which, though it bears no relation to the trivial contemporary *cliché*, "Art for Art's sake," will be a bulwark (in the day of reckoning that one has foreseen) to the truth underlying that cry. But perhaps that is simply because this poet, as artist, *was* the devout lover, the reckless spendthrift of herself, the tenacious, tireless, painstaking follower of a vision.

But the proximate cause of the change from the characteristics of the first period lies in the changed conditions of the poets' life—;that, in its turn, of course determined by their mental development. They were in many ways different people from the authors of *Callirrhoë*. Six years of living, as the artist lives, and the production of nine plays and at least one book of lyrics, had re-created them. Travel had made them free of a larger world, larger not merely in physical extent. For they were avid of the best in life; and they had the taste to gather and the temper to assimilate the finest things that the old cities of the

Continent could offer. But whereas their early impulse had been toward Teutonic culture (Goethe had drawn them, and the German philosophers), now it was the art and the thought of the Latin races which held sway. Visits to Italy, and art friendships there and in London: research into medieval Latin chronicles, into French and Italian history: residence in Paris and contact with the Gallic sense of form —;all helped the trend of their mind. And when they determined to leave Clifton and settle at Reigate, the act was almost symbolic. For they removed themselves into what was at once a bigger and a smaller world, the resources of the metropolis lying accessible to the deliberate limits of their social existence, much as their greater mental area now lay subject to a stricter rule.

As a consequence, these plays are different in material, in spirit, and in manner from the plays of the first period. The material comes from the subjects which were most attractive to them at the time, much of it from old Roman history and the chronicles of medieval France. In spirit the work is withdrawn from the temporary, the immediate, and the actual, and is concerned with the more permanent issues of life; and in manner the sense of form which now ruled their æsthetic has constrained them to a finer balance, a sharper definition, and a greater simplicity of structure. The cumbrous Elizabethan machinery has been scrapped; and with a more careful economy of means, the plays are compressed into smaller compass. The wearisome and often redundant fifth act has disappeared. Three acts are the rule, with a fourth as an occasional exception. There is no subdivision into scenes, the movement of each act thus flowing uninterrupted. There are fewer long speeches, fewer soliloquies: dialogue is more nervous and forcible. Fine poetry is not wanting, but it is now in smaller proportion to dramatic and psychological truth. And action goes forward at its proper pace, pushed by the emotion of the moment, and freighted only by its just weight of

reflection.

As a handy label, it is convenient to classify this drama as a Latin group. Its most prominent feature is, indeed, a Roman trilogy which the poets were engaged upon (though not exclusively) for seven years. These three plays are, in historical order, *The Race of Leaves* (1901), *The World at Auction* (1898), and *Julia Domna* (1903). Another Roman play, despite its title, is *Attila, my Attila!* (1896); and two whose subjects belong to French history and are drawn from medieval Latin chronicles are *Anna Ruina* (1899) and *In the Name of Time*. This last was, by the evidence of letters, being worked upon as early as 1890, but it was probably not finished until much later; and one imagines that after the poets' conversion to the Roman Church theological scruples withheld them from publishing it. It did not appear until after their death, in 1919; but it belongs, in spirit and in form, to their work of the nineties.

Anna Ruina, a Russian princess, daughter of Jaroslav, became queen to Henry I of France in the middle of the eleventh century. Henry was prompted to seek a wife in so distant a country because nearer royal houses were already allied; and the medieval popes had an uncomfortable habit of excommunicating princes who married within the forbidden degrees. His Russian wife secured him from such molestation; but when, after his death, his widow married his kinsman Raoul, Conte de Valois, the pope of the moment annulled the marriage and ordered Raoul to take back his former wife—;a woman notoriously evil —;whom he had divorced. Our play is concerned with the loves of Anna and Raoul, their struggle with the Church, and the disastrous conflict between Anna's passion and her piety which brought ruin on them both.

So much it seems necessary to premise concerning this somewhat unfamiliar story, which the poets appear to have gathered from French and Latin chroniclers who stress very quaintly Anna's piety. One old historian thus

describes her:

> Icele dame pensoit plus aux choses a venir que aux choses presentes ... dont il avint qu'ele fist estorer a Senliz une Yglise en l'enor S. Vincent.

The Abbey at Senlis which she built, and in particular St Vincent's tower, is used very effectively both as a setting for the play and as a symbol of that in Anna's character which was deep and strong enough to defeat her love. The strength of this religious sense, and the consequent rigour of the conflict, are of course to be measured by her love; for which reason the whole first act is devoted to a vigorous presentment of Anna, the widowed queen, mother and regent of the young king, putting off her royalty to claim Raoul's love, and sweeping aside every obstacle in order to become his wife. It is, therefore, as no feeble puppet of the Church that she twice betrays her love to her faith at the crucial moment; for she has force, decision, independence of character. It is from something deeper than these, which also the poet is careful to indicate in the first act—;a religious instinct which lies at the roots of her nature and which is, in some of its aspects, identical with her love. Thus when, in the opening of the second act, the Pope orders her to renounce Raoul, she at first joins in his defiance, and yields only to the archbishop's lurid prophecy of the damnation present and to come which she will bring upon Raoul. The third act finds her in retreat at the convent which she endowed, profoundly discouraged and disillusioned. She perceives her act to have been foolish and futile, of the worst cruelty to Raoul, because it has driven him back to his wife and a life of debauchery. At the command of the Church, in a kind of perverse obedience, he has taken back the repudiated Aliénor, and both have plunged into an orgy of sensuality. Stories of their abandoned living penetrate the Abbey walls, are whispered among the sisterhood, and reach Anna's ears. They cost her remorse for her own folly, and wrath against

Raoul's infamous wife. The act opens in the convent garden on a winter afternoon. Twilight is falling rapidly, and an old nun who has been talking to Anna puts away her gardening-tools and goes into the convent. Anna, left alone in the gathering darkness, sees the gate open and the figure of a man enter. She recognizes instantly that it is Raoul; but he strides forward without knowing her.

Raoul. What are you,
Crossing my pathway, like a ghost?

Anna. You come?

Raoul. To search this convent. Aliénor, my wife,
Is here in hiding. I am come to kill her.
Say where she hides.

Anna. I cannot.

Raoul. By all saints,
You are a hypocrite. I shall discover
My victim in your bleating flock. [*He passes on.*

Anna. I think,
Oh, I believe he does not know my voice;
He passes on beyond me—;to what deed?
To one most righteous, one that long ago
He should have wrought. But is it possible
That she abides here? Ah! I recollect....
I have the clew!—;My lord!

Raoul [*turning*]. And who are you?
Your name? Your purpose? [*Coming closer.*]
Well, my crystal flower,
What is the part you play? Are you a Queen,
My Countess, or a little temptress nun?
Give me the word.

Anna. Who am I—;dear, my lord,
Your handmaid if you come, wronged in your honour,
To punish treason. I will lead the way.
But first a light.... [*Stooping to kindle the lantern.*] This
evening in the dark
A woman crept along; the chapel door
Received her. But I have not seen her face.
[*Looking toward the chapel.*
How dark and shut!
She sleeps, if she is sleeping, in a tomb....
If she is sleeping.

Raoul. Is the chapel locked?
But you have entry. Give me up the key.

Anna. Then waken her. To slay one in one's sleep
Is like a murder.

Raoul. Anna, you are cold,
These hands are far more icy than the keys....
Some wrath is in your heart.

Anna. O love, beloved,
That she could so betray you! Take the light,
Swift to your vengeance!

Raoul. Guide me to the door....
There is the siren in your voice. I falter....
Say, Anna—;we are lovers, it is dark,
And if I have your love that is revenge,
The sweetest to my lips.

Anna. Go, strike her dead.
It is my swift command. Betwixt us twain
There is no secret moment while she lives.
Strike swiftly, for I perish.

Raoul. But lead on;
It was your promise....

Anna. I will look no more
Upon her face, or dead or living. Strike,
With an open-dealing justice.
[*She turns with the lantern away.*
Raoul. And no light,
Your will, but shifting Luna.
[*He disappears in the gloom.*
Anna. I would pray....
[*Facing the tower.*
How still and awful! I could wish the bells
Would jangle on my ear: through the open turret
Two stars at gaze, but no sharp monitor.
And there is peril. Treason moves about
Somewhere, though indistinct. Some wrong is done
That the wide stream of starlight warns me of.
What is it? [*She remains looking steadily up.*

Raoul [*returning*]. But the door is barred within....
I cannot enter. Quick, take up the lantern
And light me to my work.... You will not come?
... You are dazed,
Staring at that high belfry. Off again!
An instant, you have lost the scent, poor Lulla!
What puts a woman off the scent of life
Like this religion! [*Catching her wrist.*] But you shall not
damn me
A second time with your uncertain strength
And eddying virtue. Come, take the lantern
And tremble to the doorway.
[*She holds the light steadily, looks
in his
face, and stretches her
arm as a
barrier between him and*

the chapel.

Anna. ... Count of Valois,
No further! I am taken unawares
In a great sin. That woman is my foe,
I am thirsting for her death.... We may not touch her.
She is in sanctuary.

Raoul. But I am come,
An angel sent to carry her to hell;
She is misplaced among the just, and if
You would escape damnation with the damned,
Light me to fling her down the great abyss.
Unbar your arms.

Anna. She rests beneath my roof,
The tower I raised, and, as I am a Queen,
Her life shall be untouched.

Act III

In the Name of Time is the most exciting of Michael Field's plays, because it presents the high adventure of a soul. It is the work of her mid-career, the expression of a mature philosophy, and of fine, though not faultless, technique. It was conceived and in great part written when she was in love with life, a worshipper at the altar of her art, and—;this is the most significant condition of its being —;when she was entirely free from theological prepossession. For the play is concerned with an idea —;the greatest of all, perhaps, since it is the idea of God. Carloman, the protagonist, determines in its first lines to possess *the Great Reality*; and the drama follows him through one avenue after another of baffled quest until, dying in a prison, he murmurs his latest creed:

... I for myself
Drink deep to life here in my prison cell.

Fellowship, pleasure,
These are the treasure—;
So, I believe, so, in the name of Time....

One sees why, after the poets became Roman Catholics, they hesitated to publish this work; for the protagonist is that Carloman (son of Charles Martel, King of the Franks to A.D. 741) who renounced a kingdom for the monastic life. But in Michael Field's presentation of him he is no submissive son of the Church. He has the independence and audacity of intellect of the poets themselves at this period; and he is the absolute visionary which they were capable of being and sometimes were. Nevertheless the play is not a polemic; and though it is vastly interesting on the speculative side, it is no philosophical treatise. It is genuine drama, and a striking example of the way in which our poets could at this stage fuse thought and form. Carloman's spiritual adventures move us because they are enacted in human stuff; the events of his life utter his character. We see them through the renunciation of his royalty, the abandonment of his faithless wife and their child, the first convent life and its disillusion, the craving for freedom and the reawakening of ambition, the journey to Rome and dismissal to a second monastery, the revolt against bondage, the escape and armed rebellion against the Pope, the return to his home and his now prostituted wife, his recapture, imprisonment, and death. But being thus true to life, these spiritual adventures are, in their primary quest, inconclusive. For all the passion of pursuit, the vehement rejection of the outworn, the eager clutch at experience, the joyful confidence at every new turn of the road that now at last the Great Reality is in sight do but lead Carloman back to the common things of life, and only furnish him with light enough to keep a foothold in the actual world. Carloman does not find the Great Reality, though glimpses of its nature fitfully shine on him. But he

discovers how to live—;that human existence to be tolerable must be sweetened by fellowship and ennobled by pleasure. Those bare elements are all that he attains; but he throws off, in the process of arriving at something so simple, hints and gleams of truth more complex and more vivid. To gather merely those flashes may do an injustice to the work as drama; but one must risk that, for its thought is at least of equal importance. And since these fragments express the character of Carloman as he passes stage after stage of his quest, it follows that they cannot be a coherent philosophy.

There is no vanity in life; life utters
Unsparing truth to us,—;there is no line
Or record in our body of her printing
That stamps a falsehood. Do not so confound,
Father, life's transience and sincerity.

* * *

The thing to do
Is simply just the sole thing to be done.

* * *

There should have been no tears, no taking leave,
A freeman can do anything he will.

* * *

Oh, do not put your trust in Time;
Put on at once *forever*, leap to God!
Have done with age and death and faltering friends,
Assailing circumstance, the change of front
That one is always meeting in oneself,
The plans and vacillations—;let them go!
And you will put on immortality
As simply as a vesture.

* * *

Heaven detests
A beggar's whining. God is made for Kings,
Who need no favours, come to Him for nothing
Except Himself.

* * *

We must escape
From anything that is become a bond,
No matter who has forged the chain—;ourselves,
An enemy, a friend: and this escape,
This readjustment is the penitence....

* * *

But there is no such thing—;
A vow! As well respect the case that sheathes
The chrysalis, when the live creature stirs!

We make these fetters for ourselves, and then
We grow and burst them. It is clear no man
Can so forecast the changes of his course
That he can promise *so I will remain,*
Such, and no other. Words like these are straws
The current plays with as it moves along.
* * *
... You cannot see that Time
Is God's own movement, all that He can do
Between the day a man is born and dies.
... Think what the vines would be
If they were glued forever, and one month
Gave them a law—;the richness that would cease,
The flower, the shade, the ripening. We are men,
With fourscore years for season, and we alter
So exquisitely often on our way
To harvest and the end.
* * *
It never is too late for any seeing,
For any recognition we are wrong.
* * *
Earth's wisdom will begin
When all relationships are put away,
With their dull pack of duties, and we look
Curious, benignant, with a great compassion
Into each other's lives.
* * *
Pepin. And are you not a rebel?

Carloman. I am, I am, because I am alive—;
And not a slave who sleeps through Time, unable
To share its agitation.
* * *
The God I worship. He is just *to-day*—;
Not dreaming of the future,—;in itself,
Breath after breath divine! Oh, He becomes!

He cannot be of yesterday, for youth
Could not then walk beside Him, and the young
Must walk with God: and He is most alive
Wherever life is of each living thing.
To-morrow and to-morrow,—;those to-days
Of unborn generations.

The Roman trilogy dramatizes the epoch in which the decline of the Empire began, and covers, in the period from A.D. 180 to 212, the disastrous reigns of Commodus, of Didius Julianus, and the co-emperors Caracalla and Geta. The interlude of Pertinax and his heroic effort to stop the downward movement is not treated, except that his assassination is the starting-point of *The World at Auction*; and the military adventures of Septimius Severus offered the poets no suitable material. The three plays have not, therefore, a common protagonist: royal persons were killed off too quickly to be of service in this respect. But there is, nevertheless, a real bond between the three plays in the idea of the State; and there are physical links in certain persons of the drama. Thus Marcia, the noble Christian slave who was so closely associated with Commodus that her figure appears engraved with his on certain coins of the period, plays a very important part in the two first tragedies, with Eclectus her lover. Fadilla, sister to Commodus, and Pylades, a Greek dancer and pantomime, appear in all three plays—;Pylades giving the poets a welcome opportunity to present the character of artist that they always delighted in.

The first play of the trilogy, *The Race of Leaves*, is concerned simply with the downfall of Commodus. There is, of course, no deliberate presentation of a problem in any of these plays of the second period, though a problem of some sort is implicit in every one. It is not, in the trilogy, capable of statement as one clear force fighting another to a single issue; but as the complex, fluctuating, diverse

elements of the epoch, making for conflict of morals, of religion, of class, of political and Imperial interests. And if it be protested that that is altogether too vague and abstract as a motive for drama, the reply is, of course, that it is by no means presented as theory. It is wrought into the persons of the drama and impels them. Imagination has so possessed itself of the historical situation that what was rotten in the State has crept insidiously into the life of the play, which goes to its tragic end in consequence.

It would be a fascinating study, illuminative of the different mental processes of the historian and the poet, to compare, throughout the trilogy, what Gibbon made of the same materials. One must not be beguiled far along that path; but in respect of Commodus, he is for Gibbon (and, of course, the evidence supports his judgment) an unnatural monster with "every sentiment of virtue and humanity extinct." Which is to say that the historian has collated the facts and fitted them together into a certain pattern. The poet has done more than that. She has absorbed the spirit of the time; she has penetrated to the very soul of each of the persons of her drama, and that sympathetically: she has *felt* not only their individual reaction to the forces of their age of transition, but the subtle, disintegrating influence of the age itself.

Hence no rigid datum is postulated, even about Commodus. We see him, through the action of the play, in the process of becoming what he was. We see how and why he became a creature so abandoned to lust and cruelty that Marcia, a Christian and his loyal friend, could yet bring herself to mix for him the poison-cup. We see the whole desperate business already implicit in his origins: not, as Gibbon somewhat mechanically saw it, from the partiality of Marcus Aurelius for his beautiful young son, but from the elements in Commodus of Faustina's amoral nature, and his reaction from his father's stoical austerity. Thus we find Fadilla, in Act I, speaking to her sister

Lucilla of their father:

Philosophy,
That smiles on life, till life is made ashamed,
And sunders from each end for which it throbs,
Praise, glory, pleasure, how should it direct
Youth through its awful rapine? By the gods
Marcus is held as good and our fair mother
As evil ... yet our father poisoned life
In each of us from childhood, for his voice
Withered illusion, and our urgent youth
To him was nothingness, to us a lie
That could not prove the truth it made us feel.
He spoke of us as leaves within a wind,
Leaves shaken diversely: and so we are,
Unhappy children!

There are indicated in Commodus from the beginning the portents of what he afterward became; but there are also spiritual graces (his love for Marcia, his love for his sister Lucilla, and his faith in Cleander) which hold him to humanity and reasonableness. But the seed comes to its fruit through the logic of events: the grace and sweetness of humanity wither as, one by one, those whom he loved and trusted prove traitors. His deepest affection had been for Lucilla, and her plot to murder him shakes him to the soul. But he cannot bring himself to sentence her, and it is only under the shock of another perfidy that he is hardened sufficiently to order her death. That act is the spiritual crisis of his life, for in committing it he sins against the last ray of light left in him. When Cleander is revealed as a traitor, and Commodus rushes out to destroy his sister, he does in fact compass his own destruction, both moral and physical. The scene occurs in Act II, and I quote it for the reason that it is the crucial incident of the drama. But the rightness of its psychology steadily wins the mind as one perceives how the memory of Lucilla's crime works in him

at first to reject the warning of Marcia and Fadilla because they are women; the reaction to pity after he has condemned Cleander; his revulsion to hatred of Marcia because she brings evil tidings and comes in ugly clothing; the swift change when he appeals to her sympathy; his turning to perverse rage again when she cannot weep with him for the traitor, and he rushes out to sentence Lucilla —;this, finally, in order to avenge himself on Marcia because she had begged him to spare his sister.

Fadilla and Marcia have broken upon his revels, dressed in mourning as a sign of their ominous news, and Commodus has commanded them to speak at once, on pain of death:

Marcia. 'Tis you must die,
My lord, unless—;[*to Fadilla*]—;but tell him, Princess, all.
He will believe a lady of his blood.
Tell him of ruin, tell him he has lost
The Roman people, tell him he has lost
The moiety of his guard, that he must dread
From his own subjects what could never chance
By hand of barbarous nation.

Eclectus. All is lost;
Your Guard is broken; you are now defenceless,
And on the brink of slaughter....

Fadilla. Outside these walls a fiery hatred marshals
The citizens. They have a single shout
Of hunger after justice, and one name
For all they hate—;Cleander. Every voice
Demands his head.

Commodus. An execrable plot!
I cannot listen any more to words;
They are the language of conspirators.
[*To Marcia.*] But you have put your beauty quite away,

Made yourself hideous, distasteful. There
Again I catch design; my sister too—;
Cleander smote her lover. Envious, Ha!
That was Lucilla's keynote. Agony!
I will not give him up.

Marcia. He is a traitor.
I say this in Truth's name.

Commodus. And through your eyes
I look as to the bottom of the well.
Marcia, come nearer! You are deadly sure ...?

Marcia. Eclectus!

Commodus. No, swear to me by your eyes....

Marcia. Cleander is a traitor. He has brought
A host together, he has armed your people
To strike you dead unless you quell this strife:
He fraudulently bore the public grain
To private granaries, till famine raged,
And still it rages on. Although I tremble
To move you with the sorrow worst to man
Of finding falsehood in the services
That fashioned every day, I, who must die
So soon beside you, yet proclaim with Rome
Cleander is a traitor. [*She gazes into his eyes.*

Commodus. So you doom him,
So! Woman, how I hate you. From his youth
When every office nearest to myself
Was his, and he familiar with my pleasures,
My needs, my health, my privacy, my sleep,
Even then he was a traitor? All must end
If such a hollow, such inanity
Gape round me as existence. [*Re-enter Cleander.*

... Let him die!

Cleander. ... The cup!

Commodus. He promised me
To bring it. It is brought. A poison-bowl!
Drink, drink, Cleander; pledge me!
[*Cleander drops the cup and crouches at his feet.*
Cleander. I am lost,
Crushed by your sudden anger. Could I drink?
'Twas an oblation. Are you not a god,
And through my service? Dare you cast me off?
Dare you discard such deep fidelity?
Gods do not so desert.

Eclectus. You are condemned. The crowd impatient.

Cleander. Master, by our youth,
By all my fond devotion.... If I erred,
It was for you. I twisted circumstance
For you, I stole, I lied....

Marcia [*calling*]. Laetus!

Cleander. Her voice—;
The harlot, my accuser!

Marcia. Laetus! [*Laetus enters with soldiers.*

Commodus. Take
Your victim, offer him!
[*Cleander is dragged away. Commodus wraps his face in his mantle.*
I shut my ears.
Truly I am a god; 'tis on this wise
The gods abandon, deaf to circumstance.
You cannot rate him. Why, he kept my rooms:

A little Phrygian slave, the cryer offered,
They bought him for me, and he jigged a dance
Of the mountain-loving Mother the first night
He placed my pillow. Marcia, cling to me!

Marcia. My lord!

Commodus. Cling, cling as to a drowning man.
O Veritas, I loved him. Do not weep.
[*A distant cry and shouts are heard.*
For me, I must. A ghost cries after me;
And at the little bloodless Hades-moan
My heart grows soft.

Marcia. Oh, steel yourself. Cleander
Has fallen justly.

Commodus. So you will not weep!
He shall have justice in the Shadow-land.
Some parchment—;Quick!—;[*Exit.*

Fadilla. What moves him?

Marcia. Something moves,
Something! When men rise restless from their tears
One must not ask their errand....
[*Re-enter Commodus.*
. . . . .
Commodus [*to Pylades*]. Bear this sentence
Forth to the hall, to Laetus. It condemns
One I found wholly guilty: she must die.

Fadilla. Gods, 'tis Lucilla!

Commodus. Bear the sentence, beauty....
Ah, Marcia, this is well; you do not move.

Marcia. How could I?

Commodus. What a rigid ugliness you stand. I hate you.

The World at Auction follows *The Race of Leaves* historically (though it appeared earlier) with the inglorious episode of the reign of Didius Julianus. This is he who is said to have bought the Empire with his fortune and to have paid for it with his head; and that barter is the whole plot of the drama. *Julia Domna* takes up the chronicle after the death of Severus has left his sons Caracalla and Geta joint emperors. Its plot is concerned with the jealous struggle between the two brothers and its fatal issue, which all the astuteness and the passionate devotion of their mother, Julia Domna, could not avert.

Lack of space prevents one from dealing fully with these plays; and from *The World at Auction* it is impossible to do more than quote, from the initial incident of the barter, Marcia's protest. The Prætorian Guard has just assassinated the uncomfortably virtuous Pertinax, and the Imperial seat is vacant. We are introduced to the house of Didius, and are shown his wealth, his vanity, his weakness, and the greed and ambition of his wife and daughter; that is to say, the elements which make for his downfall. His treasurer, Abascantus, enters with the news that the Prætorians are putting Rome up for sale, and he proposes that Didius shall bid for it. Marcia interposes, horrified:

Rome for sale!
The empire offered! Didius, do not listen;
There is no verity behind this cry;
The world may be possessed in many ways,
It may not know its lord; but oh, believe me,
It has its Cæsar; nothing alters that,
No howling of a little, greedy crowd.
Why should you rule this city? Have you raised it
To higher honour? Have you borne its griefs?
Will it remember you?

Act I

There follows a masterly passage in which Didius vacillates between the indignation of Marcia and the persuasions of his family. At length he yields to them (though still half afraid of Marcia) to the extent of sending Abascantus to bid for him; and then turns whining to Marcia:

Didius. Is Rome bought and sold?
Alas, you see, she is. A purchaser
Is not ashamed to trade in noblest blood,
If once a state of servitude is owned.
We traffic in all creatures, and, if fate
Allow the traffic, we are justified.

Marcia. You are forbidden; something holds you back.
Rome to be bought! [*Showing the city.*] Look there!

Didius. But if I stood,
An army at my back to overwhelm,
You would not interpose.

Marcia. It is the strong,
And they must be accoutred by the gods—;
What helmets and what spears!—;who may prevail
In circumstance so awful. Dare you call
The Mighty Helpers who have fought for Rome
To aid you in this enterprise? I know
The day will come she will bear many evils,
And many kingdoms build their seat on her:
But touch her with a manacle for gold!
O Didius, do not dream that what is done
Of foolish men can ever come to pass;
It is the Sibyls' books that are fulfilled,
The prophecies—;no doings of a crowd.
They are laid by as dust. "If fate allow,"

You say, “the traffic”! You may change the current
And passage of whole kingdoms by not knowing
Just what is infamy; a common deed
It may be, nothing monstrous to the eye,
And yet your children may entreat the hills
To hide them from its terror.

Act I

Julia Domna, the last of the three plays, is terrible in the fierce truth of its imagination, and contains in Act II the most powerful bit of drama that these poets have written. Once again they have taken the bare bones of history and made of them human creatures of almost appalling vitality and strength. The emperors Caracalla and Geta pursue a vague and erratic course through the scene of the historian, and a dry phrase about “fraternal discord” does not much illumine it or make it comprehensible. But the poet brings to it the light of vision, and sees in Julia Domna, their mother—;a woman of rare beauty, grace, and intelligence; able, subtle, of irresistible attraction and powerful personality—;the cause of the insane jealousy between the brothers which not only explains their career, but makes the catastrophe inevitable. And what gives this play its almost awful force is that Julia Domna, though loving deeply both her sons, herself precipitates the tragedy and brings about Geta’s murder. In this element of the drama there is a tragic irony which gets itself wrought into the mere dramaturgic irony of Act II with a total effect of great intensity. When the act begins Julia is rejoicing that she has succeeded in keeping both her sons in Rome. There had been a plan to divide the Empire and to give a separate rule in East and West to each of the two brothers; but she —;her affection mastering prudence—;had opposed it. She could not tolerate the pain of parting from Geta; and the plan was defeated. The opening conversation skilfully reveals the dangerous situation that she has thus created.

Her two sons, ravenous for her favour and openly loathing each other, refuse to meet. It is only in deference to her that they consent to inhabit the same building, where they are lodged in separate suites. So long as she does not swerve a hair's breadth from impartiality, and so long as her wit can devise means to soothe and flatter each in turn, she can hold them from violence. But secretly she is not quite impartial. For Geta, her younger son, with his sunnier and gentler nature, she has a deeper tenderness. And that betrays itself when, taking Caracalla in what seems a propitious mood, she proposes to him a reconciliation with his brother. His wrath is the more deadly in that he had felt himself, a moment earlier, alone and secure in his mother's affection. He dissembles, and promises to make friends; but when Julia Domna goes out to bring Geta, he quickly plots to kill him. He hides soldiers behind his mother's throne, instructs them to act upon a given signal, and when Geta enters receives him with a speech of welcome. The tragic irony of the scene is complete; Geta's death, when it comes, is of the last horror, and his mother's agony a thing only to be realized by a woman and expressed by a great poet.

The act is so complete a unity that to detach a part of it must necessarily do the poet an injustice. One risks taking the central passage, however, in the hope that even out of its context something may remain of the imaginative truth which sees Caracalla, lulled for the moment by his mother's welcome, and exultantly promising her a boon, for that reason turned to fury the more vengeful when the boon that she names is begged for Geta. One may be prepossessed; one may, with the cumulative weight of the whole tragedy in one's mind, see more in a phrase than the poets intended to put there. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that Caracalla's answer to his mother, "Rise from your knees," and her frightened rejoinder, "I am not kneeling," are supreme touches, awful in their brief, pregnant,

startling rightness.

Caracalla, happy to find his mother alone, has been protesting his love for her:

Caracalla. As wine
I have flushed your face. Are you so weary now
And so dejected? But your very raiment
Shines in my presence and casts off a dust
Of little stars.
... What is the boon?

Julia Domna. What boon?
... I had forgot.

Caracalla. But I will grant it,
I must in this great prodigy of joy
To find you thus, to give you health again
Simply by breathing near you. Majesty,
No son, but Hercules I think in me
Has pulled at Juno's breasts again. I smack
The flavour still of those first draughts. Beloved,
If you would ease my reeling brain, confer
Some labour on me, some attempt; for you
I would disjoint the hills.

Julia Domna. Nay, of myself
And for myself I cannot heave a wish.

Caracalla. But for your greater honour—;a fresh palace,
Baths of more tempered coolness, any jewel
That the East buries....

Julia Domna. ... For my greater honour,
And pride of glory! But there is a thing....
Come to me, for you cannot understand
Unless I speak it close.
[*She stretches her arms to*

Caracalla, and
whispers to him.

Caracalla. Rise from your knees.

Julia Domna. I am not kneeling.
[*Caracalla is silent. She turns away,*
terrified.
Caracalla [*with a slow smile*]. But there is a power
I may myself invoke.

Julia Domna [*turning to him*]. O Caracalla,
Your daemon, the low voice of your own soul.

Caracalla. You cannot name the power....

[*After a pause, with a deep inclination.*

When least you hope,
Your prayer is heard. Lo, I extinguish strife
With Geta, in your presence meet him here,
Within your room; and we will give this palace
One hearth, one board, one audience-chamber, one
Glad-smiling Lar—;for we will be as one,
And rule as one. You shall embrace him even
Before my eyes. Go, fetch him out of exile;
Bring him to me.

Julia Domna. If from your soul you speak....

Caracalla. By Vesta's Sacred Relics.

Julia Domna. You will meet him?

Caracalla. Within the hour.

Julia Domna. And will become as one?

Caracalla. Ay, as one son.
[*Julia Domna, still keeping her eyes on him, goes out.*
The Syrian bitch, what guile!
[*Calling to the soldiers in the anteroom to order the murder of Geta.*
Tarantus, heigh!

Other Roman work of this period is *Stephania* (1892), a trialogue dealing not very convincingly with the vengeance taken by the wife of the Roman consul Crescentius on Otto III. There is much interest and not a little beauty in this play, but no dramatic conviction. One comes, therefore, finally, to *Attila, my Attila!* (1896), which refuses to be passed over in complete silence, though it does not lend itself to quotation. The intellectual motive here is much more conscious than in the other plays of the group. Indeed, the play is in spirit a survival from the earlier period, and belongs to this one only in external things of matter, form, and date.

Honoria, the heroine, is described by the poets as "the new woman of the fifth century," and the mere record of that fact is enough to indicate the nature of the problem which will be dealt with. But Michael Field did herself a greater injustice than usual in trying to define the meaning of this drama in terms which suggest a local and temporary phase. For just as neither Honoria nor the 'new woman' of the nineteenth century was really new and transitory, but rather a reassertion of very old and permanent things, so this play belies its preface; and instead of treating a mere 'movement' in a given epoch, it is found to deal with perennial human stuff.

Honoria, the little princess of A.D. 450, to whom even Gibbon was sympathetic, is no mere smasher of windows —;though she does that too in her own way, by an illicit union with a young chamberlain of the palace whom she

loves against prudence and convention. She is, however, in her complete significance, something more than a rebel against convention. The poet wrought better than she knew, and gave in her Honoria a woman's presentation of the woman's right to love and motherhood. She had formulated the idea before, tentatively and somewhat in disguise, in *The Cup of Water*; and her letters at that time amusingly reveal both trepidation lest her real meaning should be discovered, and anger at the blunderers who did not detect it. She need have had no fear: no one guessed. The time was not ripe; and now, ten years after, with the production of *Attila*, it still was not ripe. It may even be that we have had to wait for the teaching of Freud to make plain all that is implied in this play. Of him the poets knew nothing; and could they have known, would have disliked intensely, as most healthy minds do, his obsession with the idea of sex. Yet they have done the poet's work so well —;which is to say, they have observed so carefully, thought so fearlessly, and so vividly imagined—;that they have presented (without in the least intending to do so) an almost pathological study of suppressed instinct: one which illumines and is in its turn illuminated by the residuum of truth which does underlie the fantastic theories of the psycho-analyst.

Yet once again it is necessary to qualify an impression of too stark a problem. One repeats, therefore, that the problem, though distinct and weighty, is implicit; it grew up in the artist's despite. Honoria is not a peg on which to hang a theory or a puppet with which to illustrate one. She is a creature of great vitality who wins our affection and our pity by her eager challenge of life and her disastrous defeat. We watch her developing from an immature and impulsive girl who follows innocently her newly awakened maternal instinct into a woman whose rich emotional power and mental strength have been thwarted by repression and perverted to an insane infatuation for the

Hun king, Attila. But it follows from those elements that the chief value of the play is its psychology and not its dramatic power. The work will charm for half a dozen reasons—;its sympathy with the youthful rebel, its gem-like utterances on love, its mental courage, its penetration, its dramatic truth; but it never rises to the force of the great scenes of the trilogy.

V. THE TRAGEDIES—;III

THE last group of tragedies is that which was published from the year 1905 onward to the poets' death—;and afterward; but it was not a product of their latest creative activity. That activity was lyrical: or, if it ventured at all into the region of tragedy (as in an unpublished piece called *Iphigenia in Arsarcia*) it was with tragic genius shorn and subdued by Christian hope, Christian meekness, and Christian triumph over death—;which is to say, that it was tragedy no longer.

One may not assert in round terms that, of the eleven plays in this last group, not one was written after Michael Field entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1907. But the evidence suggests that they were all conceived before that date; and although certain revision may have been done afterward to some of them, the more important plays were completed before the poets' conversion.

After that event their minds were possessed by the exaltation of the mystic, and their days were largely occupied in devotional exercises. Obviously they were not in the mood for the objective imagining of the dramatist; and an artistic cause is thus added to the philosophic one for the suspension of dramatic impulse.

In the Name of Time, as I have elsewhere stated, must be

put back as far as 1890; *A Question of Memory* was written and played in 1893. *Deirdre* in its first form was in existence years before they died, and with *Borgia* would rank in style with their earlier chronicle-plays. These two belong to the last dramatic phase only in their tragic motive. *Mariamne* was finished in 1905, *The Accuser* by January 1907, and one at least of the Tristan plays by 1903.

I have called these plays an Eastern group, because the most prominent of them are Eastern in theme—;and for another reason. But several come much nearer home for their subject. Two of them, *Tristan de Leonois* and *The Tragedy of Pardon*, deal with different aspects of the Tristan legend; and one treats (*en fantaisie*) of that great lover, Diane de Poytiers. Nevertheless, whatever the theme, all possess the characteristic which makes a second reason for describing them as Eastern—;namely, an almost Oriental violence of passion. Thus Cesare Borgia is hurled to the abyss down the immense ascent of his ambition. Deirdre's love—;too noble for caution, too great to calculate, and too proud to dissemble—;compels catastrophe. Herod's passion passes into a destroying madness. Ras Byzance consumes his universe in the hell of his own jealousy; and the messiah Sabbatai, distilling a cold spiritual pride, cries from its lonely central ice, "I am a god," only to shrivel incontinently at the first touch of the world's derision. It is as though Michael Field were consciously ruled in this last phase of her Tragic Muse by the lines from the *Antigone* which she has set upon the first page of her *Deirdre*, "Nothing that is vast enters into the life of man without a curse." For it is with the vast, the excessive, the overwhelming that she deals here; and since she is a tragic poet, she sees the vast forces accompanied by their curse, and life persistently followed by its attendant shadow.

The Herodian trilogy is the clearest illustration of this,

because the material has been reduced to its simplest elements. It is, too, a good example of the poet's dramatic art in its final manner, since therein is developed almost to an extreme her compacted, elliptical method of presentation. She had from the first a gift of seizing character into expression which, though intensely poetical, was often abrupt, fragmentary, and disjointed; the swift words leaping from the cloud of passion like lightning in a night of storm, and laying bare in one instant the whole earth and sky. In these plays, and especially in *Queen Mariamne*, this characteristic economy is practised to an extent which sometimes almost defeats itself.

Only two plays of the trilogy were completed, *Queen Mariamne* and *The Accuser*. But neither suffers from the absence of the third; for while the first is the tragedy of Mariamne and the second the tragedy of Herod, the two together form a complete dramatic presentment of the historical figure of Herod the Great. It is a subject made for drama; and although for a century before Michael Field no great rendering of it had been made, the *flair* of the early seventeenth-century dramatists had unerringly tracked it down and fastened upon it. Fenton's *Mariamne* (a hundred years later) is a rather blustering affair, mainly occupied with intrigue and family feuds, and presenting Mariamne as an inferior kind of gramophone with a very limited number of records.

But a pleasing and significant fact about the origins of Michael Field's *Queen Mariamne* is that this was the subject of the first English drama ever published by a woman. In 1613 a play appeared called *The Tragedie of Mariam, the faire Queene of Jewry, written by that learned, vertuous and truly noble Ladie, E. C.* And although there has been some question as to which of two possible individuals this "truly noble" E. C. represented, both of them were women; and it seems to have been established now that the author was certainly Lady

Elizabeth Carew. Whether our poets knew of this play and its authorship does not appear: they seem to have gone straight to Josephus for their material, and to have been completely loyal to him. Indeed, so close do they keep to the historical record of their persons, that the transformation they effect is the more magical. They take the rugged facts, and breathe life into them. Thus their Mariamne grows out of history like a tree out of a bare hillside, made from the rock and rooted in it, and yet a new and living thing. She is very clearly and strongly drawn, a nature that clings with racial tenacity fast to the ties of family, and which therefore cannot forget the dead grandfather and brother who lie between herself and Herod. She does not wish to avenge them: she possesses an integrity which holds her loyal to the man her husband "who had slain her kin"; but she cannot love him, and she finds it impossible to be polite to his relatives. That intriguing Idumean set! Mariamne the Maccabee, impolitic and proud, allows herself to sneer at their Edomite origin and their creeping ways. But she will not countenance, either, the plots of her own mother; and stands alone, a noble if scornful figure, between their snarling camps.

The question as to whether Herod's passion for Mariamne does at last win her love is one which attracts the modern romantic, though it was, of course, irrelevant to Josephus. To him the damning fact about her was that she permitted herself to be haughty to her husband; and Michael Field respects her original so far as to leave the question unsolved. Yet it is possible to see in a hint or two the gradual filming over, so to speak, of the wounds that Mariamne had suffered at Herod's hands; and an appeal to his love, as to a refuge, from the spiteful, clamorous hatreds of both their families. The tentative response makes her tragedy the more poignant. But even had she loved Herod, her pride could not have borne the insult of that fatal summons to his pleasure. The Asmonean princess

denied the Edomite, and, lighting up his wrath, thereby fell into the hands of those malignant enemies their relatives. These, when Herod would have annulled the death-sentence passed on her, fanned his jealousy and outraged pride, and compassed her end.

Mariamne's death, even in the plain statement of the historian, is one of the sublime tragedies of the world. Our poet does not move a hair's breadth from the facts, nor colour them. She was probably tempted to do so, for there is a sense in which the facts were undramatic enough to defeat her. Mariamne makes no defence when she is accused, no protest when she is condemned; and the poignancy of her tragedy lies largely in her silence and her isolation. This pitiful loneliness is difficult to handle as drama; and the poet has been so true to the record that, after the short crucial scene at the beginning of Act V which provokes the catastrophe, Mariamne has no more to say than a single line as she goes to her execution. Yet the whole act is permeated by her personality and visibly moved by the forces that the poet has set alight in her. Thus even Salome and Herod's mother, spying fearfully upon Herod after the sentence has been decreed, are obsessed by the thought of her:

Cypros. Do you hear him—;hear my son; his ceaseless
treading
As the creatures tread at night?

Salome. I hear him, mother;
He is stepping out her doom.

Cypros. You hear his treading,
Soft on the carpet, struck against the marble?
Would she were dead, who hated him to death!
. . . . .
Salome. Had he but looked on her,
Those mournful, sable eyes and lids in shadow

Under the pearl-laced crown, that brow in shadow,
And the obdurate mouth had been a charm
To honour as to fortitude. But, mother,
She strives to send no message; she is silent
As trophies or cold statues.

Act V, Scene 2

Thus Herod, the first fury of his anger spent, begins to be possessed by the haunting apparition of Mariamne which will not leave him any more; and to dream, while there is yet time, of reprieve:

Herod. But there are fortresses—;
Masada by the Dead Sea coast;
There I could bury her as in a coffin,
Each sigh of wind a death-song over her.
Were not that best? A tower her monument,
Yet she not dead, not out of all account,
Still mortal....
Unseen of living nature, but alive....
With the cloud eyes of her, the silken cheek,
Even the voice of rough-edged undertone,
Enamouring offence. There none would love her,
None! But my treasury
Would have sealed riches, not a destitute,
Defaulting cave. Among the coins and jewels,
Locked-up regalia and spoil—;a queen....
The difference!...
There in the rusty gloom accessible.
The difference! I think she shall not die.

Act V, Scene 2

Salome, however, has different views on the matter; and though Herod is at first strengthened in his project by her opposition to it, he reverts to the mood of vengeance when a member of the Sanhedrin comes to plead for Mariamne's life:

Herod. My wrath is on you.
Old man, I am the judge, I am the king—;
There will not be a queen: I am her husband.
... Go back,
Far off!—;Bid those that sit and croak with you
Remember how august the Sanhedrin
Would rule the sons of Jacob. Say the king
Will turn not from his sentence for an hour.

Shemaiah. God save you!

Salome. Herod—;

Herod. I shall stay here, Salome; not with you,
But not alone.... There is no track for sleep
To wander after me; I shall not sleep.
Send Nicholas to read his History.
. . . . .
If I listen
To Nicholas it will be as a sea—;
What men have done and suffered—;as a sea
Pouring upon my ears; and it will tangle
Imagination that it shall not raise me
My bridal chamber at Samaria,
The adored head on my bosom, the young body
Loving me close, in very oneness, flesh
Even of my flesh—;our bridal a flower's heart
Of balsam, and our secrecy.... To-morrow
The people watch her to her death.
Salome,
Call Nicholas....

I shall stay here, for dawn
Comes on the other side: the sun
Comes on the other side.
Send Nicholas!

Of the final scene, and of the rendering of Herod's madness after Mariamne's execution, one can only say that history provided the poets with a magnificent opportunity and that they rose to the height of it. But it is necessary to quote at least one other passage to illustrate the progress of the plot through the development of character. Accident plays no part in the march of the story: intrigue notwithstanding, the protagonists are betrayed from within, and events proceed inevitably, like a conspiracy of life itself. Almost any scene would indicate this; but one chooses that which follows, for the further reason that it treats a well-known incident of the story, and one which reveals at once Herod's character and the nature of his love for Mariamne. I mean, of course, the secret command which he gave on two separate occasions when starting upon a dangerous expedition, that if he should die Mariamne should be instantly killed. It is an action in which the elements of his nature are stripped bare by his frantic passion. At least, the casual eye will see nothing more in it than a savage and treacherous cruelty verging on madness. How much more the poet can see need not be indicated in giving this quotation from Act II, Scene 2. Herod has returned in safety from Rome, and discovers that Joseph, who had charge of Mariamne, has betrayed to her the order to slay her in the event of Herod's death. His jealousy immediately concludes that she has bribed Joseph by her favour:

Herod. Could he have said it of himself alone?
Could he have dared so break his oath? My silence—;
Was it unsealed by him?
. . . . .
Mariamne, so you pleaded for your life,
And you prevailed. Will you not plead with me?
Will you not recollect and feign again
To me, your husband, with the words you feigned,

The love you feigned to love ... or was the man
Beloved, who was your lover?
[*Mariamne stands quite still.*
Is this pride?
You are a Maccabee, an Israelite,
King Alexander's daughter—;I of Edom,
Descended from a slave of Ascalon,
Not to be answered by your royal lips.
[*Mariamne sighs a little: then, raising
her eyes, speaks quietly.*
Mariamne. How was it drawn from him?
As the night comes up into the evening-tide.
I was sad, and he was sorrowful to death
That he had sworn a cruelty and wrong
So unavailing to repent, if done.
Spare him, lord, in belief of my clear words.
[*Herod gazes at her with awe, then muffles
his face in his robe, and speaks slowly.*
Herod. Were you so sad at dying, when to die
Was but to rise up at my bidding, *Come!*
Was but to quicken to my cry, *Receive me
Back in your arms?* Oh, you are slow of heart!
When I was dying of the pest in Rome,
And knew not I should look upon you more,
Death was not cold, death glowed with Mariamne,
I had prepared her welcome on that shore!
[*She flashes one rapid glance at him.*
Mariamne. I will wait you on that shore, my lord the king.

Herod. O my gazelle, my noble distance-keeper,
Wilt thou indeed await me? Then why tarry?

Mariamne. But do not cast between us any more
One that is dead. Spare Joseph, merciful!

Herod. The dead between us, Mariamne? Doe
Of the high places.... How?

Mariamne. My grandfather ...
[*He grips her wrist.*
[*In a whisper.*] My brother....

Herod. Peace! Were you drowning in my arms,
Your voice would sink before me so, your thoughts
Would drop bewildered so....
. . . . .
Mariamne. Spare Joseph, merciful!

Herod. Mariamne, I would reason with you. Speak!
I would question the great blood in you: a servant
False to his oath, a soldier in accord
With foes, a sentinel
Who to the nearing spy betrays the path—;
Can such men live? Are they for kings to use?
[*She moves away, looking out over the*
tombs of her ancestors. He follows.
Flesh of their dust, pronounce: can such men live?

The poets call their *Borgia* a period-play; and in its large scale, its manner of handling history, and its elaborate construction it resembles their earlier chronicle-plays rather than those of the last period. Written in six acts and a great many scenes, it has not the simplicity of design of *Mariamne*, *A Messiah*, or *Ras Byzance*. It moves through a wider circuit, embraces many more incidents, and develops character at greater leisure. It has, of course, a complex and exacting theme; one of no less magnitude, indeed, than the Italian Renaissance, centred upon the portentous Borgia trinity—;Pope Alexander VI and his children Cesare and Lucrezia.

Nevertheless, though the full measure of the play cannot be gauged except by reference to the complexity and sheer extent of its material, the tragedy is reducible to much simpler terms. For it is as the rise and fall of Cesare Borgia that one finally sees it: his stupendous ambition dominates

it; and the last and deepest impression of it is the news of his end brought to Lucrezia by his page Juanito, who had found his mangled body:

Juanito. Dawn found me tangled by the night, and crying
In the alien, stone wilderness, a captive.
They brought his arms,
His sparkling arms; they questioned of the Prince
Who wore them.

Lucrezia. But the moment....

Juanito. Of a sudden
The foe retreated, leaving me: I reached
The rough-hewn gorge....
[*Near to her and in a changed voice.*
He lay there, naked;
He lay—;his face under the sky: his wounds
A hero's—;twenty-three; across his loins
A bloodied stone, his life-blood round the rocks,
His hair a weft of red. How beautiful,
And wild and out of memory was his face!
The great wind swept him and the sun rose up....
Act VI, Scene 3

That scene is a lasting memory, as, indeed, are others to which we shall come; but the play's the thing. The poets seem to indicate this in their sub-title, suggesting that the value of the work is its value as a whole; and bare courtesy would constrain one so to regard it. But that is not an easy thing to do. Poetic drama always draws heavily on the concentration and imaginative sympathy of its readers; and this one more than most makes that demand if one is to appreciate it fully. As tragedy—;that is, as pure art—;its appeal is direct and irresistible, and could not be escaped by the most casual person who is likely to take up a book of this kind. But the casual person will not, perhaps,

perceive its other significance—;in values of history, of portraiture, of the marshalling, selecting, and grouping of facts, of the evocation of atmosphere, of what is, in short, the re-creation of a very brilliant epoch.

Take the historical aspect first. At the time the poets wrote their play the principal authorities on the subject were Gregorovius and Yriarte. The fresh data of Professor Woodward, published in 1913, and the dry light in which he presents the life of Cesare Borgia, were not accessible to them. Moreover, Yriarte, whom they seem to have chiefly followed, is now accused (in what looks to the lay mind so much like the invariable formula of successive 'authorities') of inaccuracy. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the poets were caught out in matters of fact or, a graver fault, in false deductions from the facts, to accord with Yriarte's romanticism. An obvious defence would be at hand. But the truth is that there is no need to take up the cudgels for them on this score. Apart from scenes of minor importance, they have selected as the main events of their 'plot' incidents so well documented as the murder of the Duke of Gandia, the Pope's remorse and penitence, his complicity after the event, his support of Cesare's schemes, his death at the crisis of Cesare's fortunes. Thus, too, we have Lucrezia's betrothal and marriage with Don Alfonso, Duke of Bisceglia, Cesare's hatred of her husband, his assassination, and Lucrezia's remarriage with Don Alfonso of Este. And for Cesare himself such established facts are taken as will conveniently serve to reveal his character; for example, his renunciation of the cardinalship, his military ambition, his marriage of policy, and his master-stroke of treachery in the betrayal of the Condottieri at Sinigaglia. Details of policy are avoided. Cesare's campaigns, important as they are, are wisely indicated by these unmilitary authors only in their effect on his fortunes. While as to more sinister things, rank scandal with which the air of the time was foul, a quotation will

best illustrate our poets' method of dealing with material of this kind. In Scene 4 of Act IV Cesare and the Pope, having discussed matters of weight, are reminded by a paper lying on the ground of things more trivial:

Cesare. What is this parchment?

Alexander. You have read it,
They told me. 'Tis the libel from Taranto
Sent to Savelli.
Christ, we are a kindred!
Carnage and rapine, perfidy....

Cesare. Why mince it?
Assassination, incest!
[*Rising from the ground with clenched hands.*
Alexander. But the Latin!
The dulcitude of apophthegm, the style!
What sap in all this rankness. Cesare,
I laughed an hour, applauded with wet eyes—;
Literae humaniores—;so the salt
Of the strong farce compelled me.
Do you stoop
To anger? Consul Julius Cæsar laughed
When choice Catullus spat an epigram,
And dined him that same evening.

One does not claim exact historical accuracy for the play, of course. Certain incidents are introduced which will not be found in the records, but which possess the essential truth of being in character; and the scenes they inspire are the fruit not of dramatic imagination alone, but of that power operating upon very great knowledge of the life of the time and the place. It is, indeed, in its re-creation of that life that the chief interest of the play resides. As scientific history it may fail the test—;though not by a very wide margin. But scientific history never yet re-created

life, and perhaps one has as little right to expect from it this, the great function of art, as to expect of art a precise accuracy. Yet one may claim for Michael Field that she has achieved the re-creation with a high degree of truth to fact; and further, that the poetic truth of her creation comes surprisingly near, in its implicit judgments, the final verdict of the historian. There is, of course, no overt judgment in her work: the human spectacle holds us too fascinated, pitiful, and terrified to leave room for censure. We are not concerned to weigh the guilt of Lucrezia, allured and appalled as we are by her fatal suppleness and passivity. We are in no mood to reckon the total of Cesare's crimes, terrified as we are at the stupendous force to which they but serve as a convenient means. And it is not our poet's doing, but of the mere data of history, that Rodrigo Borgia, his Holiness Pope Alexander VI, pronounces inexorable judgment on himself. This he does when, stricken by the murder of his son Giovanni, Duke of Gandia, he is filled with remorse and penitence. A vision of his son in Paradise induces the softer mood:

Alexander. Poto,
There was no scar on him, not the least wound;
That is the truth: and he stood armed again.
As bright as San Michele he looked down
Upon us from the wall, his gonfalon
Swathing around him as he stood. His face
Was to me as an angel's.
[*He weeps quietly.*] I repent,
I will change all to meet that boy again
In Paradise, no wound on him, no scar.
And yet the sight of him,
O Poto, drove down to the rasping quick
Of conscience through my heart. All shall be changed,
The Vatican be cleared of sin. These bastards....
Let me not see them more! Joffré, Lucrezia—;

Joffré must mind his government afar,
I banish him. Lucrece—;oh, I shall gather
The seas between us; she shall dwell in Spain,
Dwell in Valencia, deep, where I was born,
White little demon-girl!
[*He rises, trembling, and Poto robes him.*
No priest henceforward
Shall hold two benefices; simony
No more shall breed among us. God would punish
Some sin in us; it could not be Giovanni
Deserved a death so cruel. Gently, Poto,
You are too violent.

Poto. Patience, Holiness,
You slit the silk.

Act I, Scene 5

A cardinal point is the poet's conception of her three Borgia persons as one, united by every possible tie—;of blood, of sympathy, of ambition, of deep affinity. They are devoted to each other, and vowed as one mind to the aggrandizement of Cesare. Indeed, the core of the tragedy is, astonishingly, this simple human feeling. But the affection between them might never appear, under their sinister star, as a natural family bond. It was suspect from its origin. Thus the thread which binds the play together, and might have been so clear and firm a line, wavers and slips in those slippery high places of Renaissance Italy; and, however innocent in fact, takes from so much corruption the colour of guilt. Round the three persons of her trinity Michael Field has made to revolve the vivid life of the epoch they made and were made by—;warm, coloured, gay, radically unmoral and strictly religious, sparkling with wit and gravely learned, rejoicing equally in the sensible world and the things of the intellect, adoring art and pursuing science; at once fierce and cunning, militant and politic, barbarous and polished; frivolous,

worldly, and voluptuous, and yet saintly, serious, and capable of profound concentration and dogged industry.

The magnificence of the Renaissance is here—;in feasts, dances, military triumphs, and ecclesiastical pomp: in Cesare's resplendent trappings that provoke the covert sneer at the French Court, and in Lucrezia's countless pearls. The art of the Renaissance enters, with Pintoriccio and Michelangelo and others, to foster Cesare's love of exquisite handicraft. Its poetry comes in the person of Cavaliere; its science in the engineering works of Leonardo; its statecraft in that astute and watchful envoy from Florence, already brooding upon his *Il Principe*. And its very atmosphere clings about the scene, bright with a kind of glare, almost dazzling the spiritual sight; hot, heavy, and enervating to the moral sense. The poets were apparently well justified in calling their *Borgia* a period play.

The subject of Act I would make a complete tragedy in itself, and has in fact been so treated by other poets. Its central event is the murder of the Duke of Gandia, the Pope's sorrow and penitence, his discovery that Cesare is the murderer, and the subdual of his will to Cesare's immense designs. In Scene 1, on the occasion of Lucrezia's betrothal, the Duke is reported missing. Poto, the Chamberlain, suggests that he shall be searched for; and the Pope turns to the company, which includes his young mistress, Giulia, with a jesting protest:

Alexander. O Poto, Poto, search
His haunts! The malice of these chamberlains!
Madonna Giulia, Monsignore Poto
Would search the place where Don Giovanni hides.
Have mercy on my son!

Giulia. Monsignore finds
Your Holiness so jovial he is conquered

By the same vein.

Lucrezia. Excuse him!

Alexander. Even our ladies, Poto,
Plead for the Duke's seclusion. Without doubt
He waits for sundown to forsake the place
Where he was sociable.

But in Scene 2 levity is turned to fear. Cesare, who was last in his brother's company two nights before at a banquet given by their mother, Vanozza de' Catanei, is commanded to the Pope's presence, and succeeds in turning his father's suspicion in the direction of the Orsini. In Scene 3 the Pope, in desperate anxiety, is watching from a window of the Vatican the darkening Tiber, where fishermen are dragging for Giovanni's body. He turns suddenly to the cardinals about him:

Alexander. Where is he—;my young son,
My beautiful Giovanni? You stand round,
Wise with the Church's wisdom, but where is he?
He may be living, tortured, gagged.... He is not!
No, there is come a change in me: I know
He is not breathing with me any more,
And yet I cannot bid you pray for him;
I do not count him dead. He is but lost,
And lost so deep I do not think a creature,
Not even his Creator knows the place
That he has wandered to....

Cardinal Borgia. Have faith, his body will be found.

Alexander. His body!
When last I saw the boy
He shook his golden poll with merriment
That I received his Spanish mistress here,

A most devout and humble Catholic,
With eyes dark wells for Cupid's thirst. He laughed,
Till all the room was sunbeams from his mirth.
If God
Turn such a thing as that to carrion—;then
I shall curse God. [*Turning to Lucrezia.*
Well, wanton, you look white!
What comfort have you? Would you be a nun
That you crept to San Sisto from your palace
Soon as you heard? Is not this missing boy
Your brother?...
You have been with the boy: you know
Where he loved, where he was hated. All our loves
And hates are in your hands. You have grown more blind
Than any woman ever made herself
That she might see in the dark.
Give up your witness.
[*Lucrezia remains before him silent,*
with open mouth.
A little devil, circumspect,
When I would have rank truth.

As he wrathfully dismisses the circle Madonna de' Catanei enters:

Alexander. God's breath,
His mother!
[*She falls at his feet: he raises her.*
O Vanozza,
Poor heart!

Vanozza. My Lord, your Holiness, I came—;
Forgive me.

Alexander. Nay!
[*He falls sobbing on her shoulder.*
We mourn together. Where we had a son

For eyes' delight, there is nothing.
[*Soothing and patting Vanozza.*] Hush, you must not!
Little beloved, you suckled him. You must not!
Go home; pray to Madonna.—;She will hear.
And let me see your face.
[*Drawing her veil.*] It is the same;
As honest and as good.

Vanozza. I have good children.
I am so richly blessed ... and this dear boy,
A Prince from Spain, came back again and kissed me.

Alexander. Good son and enviable righteousness
To kiss this face in filial piety.
There, there, you must forget him!

At this moment a waterman is brought in. He relates how he saw a body brought down to the Tiber, and where it was flung into it. A messenger is sent to direct the dragging of the fishermen to the spot he indicates; and the Pope returns to the window to watch the lights of their boats. The psychology of this passage will be observed. When the Chamberlain enters and gives the Pope the fatal news he appears not to hear, but continues something he had been saying. Then he is silent while rapid question and answer pass between the cardinals; but at the mention of Giovanni's wounds he falls to the ground with a cry:

Alexander [*watching*]. A constellation!
Malign, bright stars! Giovanni! But the lights
Are moving onward to Sant' Angelo.
They move along in state. It is my son!
They dazzle me.... They pass me....
[*Enter Monsignore Burchard.*
Burchard. Holy Father,
The illustrious Duke of Gandia has been found
In velvet coat and cloak, the dagger sheathed,

His ducats in his purse.

Alexander. It sails, it sails, it sails
On to Sant' Angelo. The torches ...

Cardinal Segovia. Nothing is stol'n?

Burchard. No, not a single gem.

Cardinal Segovia. Vendetta? Are there wounds?

Burchard. I counted seven.
One mortal in the throat. His hands were tied.

Alexander [*with a howl like a lion's*]. God, by God's
blood, my curse!
[*He falls in a swoon.*

One must not stop to analyse the play, or even this first act, completely. But one ought at least to indicate its extraordinary combination of subtlety with passion. In the scenes we have glanced at, the Pope passes from pole to pole of his nature. The poets have the difficult task of indicating this transit—;from vast sorrow and horror, through remorse and penitence, suspicion, wrath, and dread at the accusation laid against Cesare, to forgiveness, reconciliation, compliance, and even a compact with Giovanni's murderer. In a cold historical statement one either finds these facts incredible, or is tempted to account for them, in Renaissance fashion, by believing the Borgia nature to have been something monstrous and unhuman. From the artistic standpoint such a transition would appear well-nigh impossible to represent convincingly. Yet it is done, and we never question that the thing really happened so. The means used to this end are often very quiet. By the lightest touches—;a broken phrase, an exclamation, or even a silence—;the poet will register the swiftly changing

current of emotion. One cannot easily illustrate this by quotation; but an example occurs in a passage already quoted—;that in which the Pope, having seen a vision of Giovanni, is filled with remorse. It will be remembered that he rails against his children, and particularly Lucrezia. Yet two minutes afterward, when he inquires for her and is informed that she is praying in the convent, he murmurs "Sweet soul!"; and one sees his rage and remorse crumble, and the whole fabric of his penitence come toppling down. In touches like this the incredible is made to look only too easy to the ductile Borgia temperament. But they are often the merest hints, as in this tiny masterpiece, Scene 4. The papal Court is by this time seething with rumour. Suspicion has fallen upon one after another of the enemies of Giovanni; but within the innermost circle there is a whisper that Cesare was the murderer. It is this that has driven Lucrezia to her convent; but at midnight she creeps out and comes to Cesare:

Lucrezia. Madonna Adriana brought me here;
She stays without: I go back to the convent.
Cesare—;tell me all that I should pray.

Cesare [*turning his head back towards her from the couch*]. Amanda, that your scruples be removed.
That I be Cesar.

Lucrezia. Take a little rest.

Cesare. Shall you, from prayer?
To-night you look a sibyl.
Who did this deed?

Lucrezia. Let Juan play the lute;
You must have music through these restless nights.
How lost you look!

Cesare. You startled me. How lost!
[*He closes his eyes.*
Lucrezia. He is dreaming; he has quite forgotten me.
Come, Adriana, soft! As an astronomer
He must not be disturbed: he is quite lost.

One leaves *Borgia* reluctantly, having done so much less than justice to it: nevertheless, it is refreshing to turn to *Deirdre* after an atmosphere so charged and tropical. Not that *Deirdre* is set on any lower plane of emotion, for it also deals with vast passions. But in this play we pass visibly to a more northerly latitude, to an austerer race and a more primitive age; and it is in an air swept clean by storm that the business of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind goes forward.

Michael Field has made a noble rendering of this old Irish story which, its subject dating from the first century, suggests a cause no less remote than that for the ancient feud between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. The story is well known: the birth of Deirdre and the prophecies of doom to Ulster through her; the defiance of the doom by Conchobar the king, and the fostering of Deirdre to be his wife; the carrying off of Deirdre on the eve of her wedding by Naisi and their flight to Alba; the invitation to Naisi and his brothers to return under Conchobar's promise of forgiveness; and the treacherous assassination of them upon their arrival. There are many variants of the legend; and our poet has chosen the oldest of them all, that preserved in the *Book of Leinster*, for the chief events of her drama. She was compelled to alter the story at one point, for it would hardly have been convenient to represent the Sons of Usnach slain, all three at one stroke, by the magic sword. But in varying the manner of their death she was enabled to adopt another form of the legend, in which Naisi and his two brothers were overcome by a Druid's enchantment, and, believing themselves to be

drowning, dropped their weapons and were immediately overpowered by Conchobar's men. There was, however, a difficulty here too; for whereas three heads lopped off at one blow was a little too dynamic even for the purposes of drama, an unseen spell of wizardry was altogether too static; and the poet therefore contrived a scene in which Naisi's comrades are actually drowned, and he, left alone to protect Deirdre, is slain by Eogan.

Another modification, with less warrant from the documents, perhaps, but of even greater interest, is that which introduces into this primitive world the first gleam of Christianity. The fact might suggest that the Deirdre play was written after the poets' conversion, did one not know that they were at work on the theme some time before. But it is extremely probable that the passage in which the wise woman Lebarcham tries to turn Conchobar from brooding on vengeance by the tale of a new god who refused to avenge himself on his enemies was inserted after the first draft of the play was made. It is written in prose, and, placed at the beginning of Act III, hardly affects the subsequent action. From that point of view it might be considered superfluous; but Michael, though not Henry, was capable of so much over-zeal. She was, however, also capable of justifying her act artistically. The interpolation is at least not an anachronism. It is possible, there in Ireland, that even so early had penetrated "the story of how a god met his death ... young, radiant ... bearing summer in his hands." But it might have been a menace to the unity of the drama: it might have destroyed the satisfying wholeness which, in whatever form one finds it, the pagan story possesses. Michael Field avoided that calamity. She threw her glimmer of Christian light across the scene in such a way that it reveals more strongly by contrast the dark elements of which the story is composed. By it one instinctively measures the barbarity of the age out of which the story came, and realizes its antiquity. The

poet does not allow it to influence action, for that would weaken the tragedy; but she uses the occasion to humanize and make credible that which, in the Conchobar of the records, seems almost monstrous. In those ancient tales Conchobar plans his vengeance on Naisi and his brothers with a coldness that is diabolic and a precision almost mechanical. He provides for his own safety, too, with comical caution, carefully sounding one after another of his knights until he finds one who does not immediately threaten to kill him for suggesting such a dastardly deed as the murder of the Sons of Usnach. Yet, as our poet has re-created Conchobar, he is a human soul driven this way and that in a running fight with passion; pitiable in his hopeless love for Deirdre, comprehensible in his wrath against Naisi, sinister and terrifying in his revenge. And underneath the overt drama lies a profounder irony; for while he is plotting in his heart the enormous treachery, Lebarcham tells of the young god who was betrayed by his friends, and he says:

Hush, woman, for my heart is broken. Would I had been there, I who can deal division between hosts. I would have set the Bound One free. If I could avenge him!

The play is written in five acts and a prologue; but is not divided into scenes. Its form is for the most part blank verse—;the iambic pentameter of Michael Field which is so often neither iambic nor a pentameter. Her verse is, indeed, a very variable line, changing its unit as frequently as will consist with a regular form; and as flexible, sinewy, and nervous as will consist with dignity, grace, and splendid colour. Prose passages occur in Acts III and V; and a form of lyrical rhapsody is used to express the Druid prophecies and Deirdre's lament. The use of lyrics in her drama was not new to Michael Field, who from the beginning could always relieve the strain of intense emotion by a graceful song. But in this case she is following, with her accustomed fidelity, lines laid down in

older renderings of the legend.

The most notable feature of this play is its ending. No author of the more important modern versions of this theme has dared to take his conclusion from the oldest one of all. Usually he has preferred the variant which tells of Deirdre, broken-hearted at Naisi's murder, falling dead into his grave. This is, of course, in some respects a more 'poetic' passing: it lends itself to romantic treatment, and its tragedy is more immediate and final. Moreover, from the dramaturgic point of view the action is easier to handle and more certain of its effect. Michael Field was not, however, attracted by mere facility. Truth drew her with a stronger lure, and to her the more ancient story would make a claim deeper than loyalty. For she would see Deirdre's survival not only as a more probable thing, but as something more profoundly tragic; and the manner of her death, when it came, as more clearly of a piece with the old saga and essentially of Deirdre's wilful and resolute character.

Deirdre is no Helen, though her legend has features so similar. The mere outline of her which the old story gives indicates a creature who will compel destiny rather than suffer it; and our poet has but completed, imaginatively, what the original suggests—;a girl whose instinct of chastity drives her away from marriage without love; whose ardour and courage claim her proper mate; whose fidelity keeps her unalterably true; and whose head is at least as sound as her heart is tender. For although she is a rather tearful creature, she is also very astute; and Naisi need not have died quite so young if he had only listened to her warning and condescended to take her advice. Deirdre is, in short, of her race and of her time as surely as Lucrezia Borgia is a daughter of Pope Alexander VI and a child of the Italian Renaissance. Michael Field's range in the creation of women characters is very wide, and the verisimilitude with which she presents natures so alien

from herself as the courtesan and the voluptuary might be astonishing if one thought of her simply as a Victorian lady, and not as a great creative artist. Nevertheless, in the re-creation of Deirdre one feels that she must have taken an especial joy, as witness the opening passage of Act I, where Lebarcham and Medv the nurse are discussing their fosterling. It is the morning of her sixteenth birthday, and King Conchobar is coming to the little secluded house where Deirdre has been brought up to claim her as his bride:

Medv. But look at her!

Lebarcham. Ay, Medv, it is not for our eyes to look.
The beauty!

Medv. She is dreaming.

Lebarcham. She sees true;
Therefore she is no poet. Gentle Medv,
My sister with the mother-eyes that rest
But when they rest on her, she is not ours,
Nor fate's, nor any man's; for she will choose,
Close prisoner as she is, her destiny,
Choose for herself the havoc she will make,
The tears that she will draw from other eyes,
The tears that will burn through her, the delights
That she will ravish from the world. She knows
So definitely all she wants: such souls
Attain. She is not dreaming; look at her!

Medv. She does not sigh as other maids kept close;
She is soft as a wood-pigeon, but no crooning—;
And when I speak of love—;King Conchobar
To be her lord—;she laughs.

Lebarcham. A wanton laugh!

Medv. No, no! Dear heart, she has no wantonness;
And yet I am afraid to hear her laughter,
It is so low and sure. My maid, my maid!
What shall I do that bitter day the King
Tears her away from me?

Lebarcham. Be comforted.
She loves you, she will bless you all her years:
But if she hate—;I would not be the creature
To cross her path, not if I were the chieftain
Of Ulla, or of Alba, or the world.

Medv. She has no malice. Would you slander her?

Lebarcham. I praise her! She can hate as only those
Of highest race, without remorse, for ever.

Again, in the same first act, when Deirdre has prevailed on Lebarcham to bring Naisi to the hut, and the two have spoken of their love, it is she who at once perceives where that confession must lead. Naisi would rather kiss and part than rob the mighty Conchobar of his bride. But for Deirdre, having kissed, there shall be no parting:

Deirdre. But we shall never part again, O Naisi,
Bear me away with you. I cannot speak,
Not much, not anything to listen to,
Yet I shall lie awake at night to ease
The pain it is to think of you by thinking
More constantly each moment. Bear me with you
To Alba, to the loveable, soft land.
[*Naisi pauses stupefied: then turns away.*
Naisi. But he has waited
For sixteen years; I am his chosen knight:
At dance, at feasting never has he turned
His eyes on woman, or if idly turned
An instant, he was back with Lebarcham

Asking of thee, thy years.
Where are you stepping?
Your feet are towards the waves.

Deirdre. For I shall travel
Either across this narrow sea with you,
Or else alone with the currents and the creatures
That travel fleet and silent underneath.

Naisi. O vehement, mad girl, it is for freedom
That you would draw this ruin on us all,
On the great King my Overlord, on Erin.
It is not well.
Women are ever captive
In their spirits and their bodies: so the gods
Have fashioned it and there is no escape.

Deirdre. You will not give me love?

Naisi. Your liberty
I shall not give you, if I give you love.
Love is the hardest bondage in the world.
I would not put such chains on any woman
To love me....

Deirdre. Let me be with you, the name
Of being with you call it what you will—;
Bondage or freedom, I should still be happy,
Yea, for a year, yea, for a brood of years.

It is, however, in the last act that Michael Field again triumphantly proves her mettle as poet and dramatist. She had stubborn material here, harsh and crude stuff which kept the poets long at bay. For Deirdre's end as related by the old bard is a bit of primitive savagery matched in terms of the plainest realism. Conchobar, after Naisi is enticed back to Ulster and murdered, takes possession of Deirdre;

and she remains in his house for a year. But her constant reproaches and lamentation weary him; and at last, in order to subdue her, he threatens to lend her for a year to the man she hates most, Eogan, the slayer of Naisi. She is thereupon driven off in Eogan's chariot, apparently subdued, seated in shame between him and Conchobar. At a gross taunt from Conchobar, however, she springs up, and flings herself out upon the ground. "There was a large rock near: she hurled her head at the stone so that she broke her skull, and killed herself."

Our poet does not try to make this pretty or pleasing: and at one point at least she uses the exact terminology of the translation from which she worked. Its brutal elements are not disguised: Deirdre's humiliation and the animal rage of Conchobar and Eogan remain hideous even after the poet, accepting all the material, has wrought it into a tragedy of consummate beauty. Its beauty has, indeed, more terror than pity in it—;it is brimmed with life's actual bitterness—;but the depth and power of this Deirdre are not equalled by any other.

In quoting the closing passage of the play one does not afflict the reader by a comment on it; but there is a technical point which should be noticed. It is the device of the Messenger by which the poet avoids the representation of Deirdre's death. The manner of that death was not only too awkward to present, but its horror as a spectacle was too great for artistic control. In causing it to be related by the charioteer Fergna, the poet has, in classic fashion, removed it from actual vision, but has enabled the mind to contemplate what the eyes could not have borne to look upon.

The chariot has driven off with Deirdre, Eogan, and Conchobar; and Lebarcham watches it till it passes out of sight beyond the mound that marks Naisi's grave. Then she turns away, lamenting; and suddenly Fergna, the charioteer, re-enters, scared and breathless:

Lebarcham. Speak, Fergna! Are they dead?

Fergna. I scarce may say.
The woman's shoulders panted on the rocks,
And over her a struggle fiercely raged
Of Conchobar with Eogan.

Lebarcham. Fosterling,
My Deirdre! Had they cast her from the car,
That thus she lay on the sharp rocks of stone?

Fergna. None touched her. She had gazed on yonder
mound,
Setting her eyes on it, while car and horses
Moved on, until the little crests at last
Rose over it; then she awoke and swept
One fierce glance over Eogan, set before,
And slid one glance as fierce toward Conchobar,
Behind her and more close! It was one hatred,
The hatred of each glance. A shudder ran
All through my body: and through all the air
Ran laughter.

Lebarcham. Hers?—;her laughter?

Fergna. No, the king's.
And then his words, the words of jest that followed!
"Deirdre, the glance a ewe
Would cast between two rams you cast on us,
Eogan and me."
She started, and the horses
Started beneath my hand. I tightened rein,
And the whole chariot shivered as she leapt
Upon the rocks before her. Then those two
Sprung to the place where she was dashed, their breath
Whistled like winds: their crossing swords, with gnash
Of hungry teeth, affrighted me. I fled,

Leaving behind the chariot stopped by trees,
Rock-rooted....
He returns—;
The king! He leads the horses of his car
Slowly along. They come, but yet as night
Comes by long twilight.

Lebarcham. Lonely Conchobar!
[*Re-enter Conchobar solemnly leading the chariot.*
O king....

Conchobar. Your horses, Fergna! Take the reins;
Lead them....

Fergna. My lord, forgive me. I will lead them
Back to their stable.

Lebarcham. Deirdre? Where is Eogan?
And Deirdre—;where?

Conchobar [*with a hoarse laugh*]. Ho, they have passed the borders,
Passed from my realm.
Nay, Fergna,
Lead the great car, checking the horses' heads
Beside yon barrow of a hero: there
Unyoke them. Dig a neighbour sepulchre.
And let the bases of each monument
Touch where they spring.

Fergna. My lord ... and shall I seek
Among the rocks?

Conchobar. You shall but lift its burthen
Forth of the chariot to the hollowed grave.

Lebarcham. O Deirdre! She is hidden by that cloak.

O shattered loveliness of Erin, hidden
From the ages, evermore! Thy Lebarcham,
Who saw thee come from hiding to our light,
Will go with thee along
To thy last screening cover, to thy tomb.
[*Exit, following the chariot led by Fergna.*
Conchobar. The land!... I wended hither: car and horses
Are wending from me. Did I move like that,
So solitary, dark above the grass?—;But
to no goal. In one of those near graves
She will be with him, one of them will open;
There can but be one tomb. The chariot lingers
Its way in happy sloth: so wheat is carried
Till night-fall to the barn....
[*He remains watching in the silence.*
The car
Has turned the cromlech....
So wheat is carried.

* * *

In concluding this very brief survey of Michael Field's life and poetry, one turns back with a sense of illumination to her sonnet called *The Poet*, which has been already quoted. For therein Michael Field has indicated the nature of her own genius and the conditions of its activity. She was not thinking of herself, of course, but of the poetic nature in the abstract, when she declared in the first two lines of the sestet that the poet is

a work of some strange passion
Life has conceived apart from Time's harsh drill.

Those verses apply in some degree to the whole race of poets, which is, indeed, the test of their truth. Yet it is significant that in choosing precisely that form of expression for the truth, Michael Field has inadvertently stated the essential meaning of her own life, of her long

service to literature, and of the peculiar greatness and possible limitation of her poetry.

"A work of some strange passion." Strange, indeed, and in many ways. For, first, it is no common thing to find, in a world preoccupied with traffic and ambition, two souls completely innocent of both. Not small souls, nor stupid nor ignorant ones—;as clever people might aver in order to account for the phenomenon—;but of full stature, intelligent, level-headed, and with their sober measure of English common sense. They knew themselves, too —;were aware that they possessed genius, that they had first-rate minds and were artists of great accomplishment. Moreover, for the larger part of their life they were on terms with 'the world'; they welcomed experience as few Victorian women dared, gathered knowledge eagerly wherever it was to be found, and had business ability sufficient to direct prudently their own affairs.

They would have denied that there was anything of the fanatic or the visionary in the dedication of themselves to their art, believing fanaticism to be incongruous with the undiluted English strain of which they boasted. And, indeed, there is something typical of the race in this deliberate setting of a course and dogged persistence in it. Yet there is hardly an English precedent for their career; and it is to France one must look—;to the Goncourts or to Erckmann-Chatrian—;to match the long collaboration, or to find similar examples of their artistic method. And not even there, so far as I know, will be found another such case of disinterested service.

But the lines we have noted have an application to the work as well as to the life of Michael Field. They may be used almost literally, to summarize in a convenient definition the nature of her poetry. For in this body of work one sees passion as an almost over-powering element, and it is of surprising strangeness. However fully one may recognize the truth that there is no sex in genius, I suppose

that we shall always be startled at the appearance of an Emily Brontë or a Michael Field. They seem such slight instruments for the primeval music that the earth-mother plays upon them. And their vehemence mingles so oddly with tenderer and more delicate strains that it will always be possible for a reviewer to sneer at what is "to the Greeks foolishness"—;he having no perception of the fact that in gentleness added to strength a larger humanity is expressed. Such an eye as Meredith's could perceive that, and, catching sight of some reviewing stupidity about it, would flash lightnings of wrath in that direction, and send indignant sympathy to the poets.

There is strangeness, too, of another kind in the passion which was the impulse of this poetry. Under the restraint that art has put upon it, it is, as we have seen, an elemental thing. It is a creative force akin to that of Emily Brontë or of Byron, and is tamer than their wild genius only in appearance. Its more ordered manner grew from two causes: that one of the collaborators blessedly possessed a sense of form, and that both of them lived withdrawn from the brawl of life. They were placed, perhaps, a little too far from "Time's harsh drill." Their lives were, on the whole, easier and happier ones than are given to most people. That is why the loss of their Chow dog caused them a grief which seems exaggerated to minds not so sensitively tuned as theirs. Until the agony of the last three years overtook them, their share of the common lot of sorrow had been the barest minimum: adversity did not so much as look their way: poverty laid no finger on them, and was but vaguely apprehended, in the distance, as something pitiful for its ugliness. Therefore, secure and leisured, they envisaged life, in the main, through art, through philosophy, through literature, and hardly ever through the raw stuff of life itself. And thence comes the peculiar character which the passion of their poetry acquired, as of some fierce creature caught and bound in golden chains.

It may be that this seclusion from life will be felt in Michael Field's poetry as a limitation; that the final conviction imposed upon the mind by the authority of experience is wanting; and that the work lacks a certain dry wisdom of which difficult living is a necessary condition. It may be so; but I do not think the stricture a valid charge against their work, first because of our poets' great gift of imagination, and second because they chose so rightly their artistic medium. Comedy may require the discipline of experience, the observing eye constantly fixed upon the object, and a rich knowledge of the world; but surely tragedy requires before everything else creative imagination, sympathy, and a certain greatness of heart and mind. Those gifts Michael Field possessed in very large degree; so large that one often stands in amazement before the protagonists of her drama, demanding, in the name of all things wonderful, how two Victorian women "ever came to think of that." A Renaissance pope, a Saxon peasant, or a priest of Dionysos—;decadent emperors, austere Roman patriots, or a Frankish king turned monk —;those are only a few of the surprising creatures of her imagination, conceived not as historical figures merely, but as living souls. And by the range of her women characters —;from the dignity of a Julia Domna to the wild-rose sweetness of a Rosamund; from the Scottish Mary, with her rich capacity for loving, to the fierce chastity of an Irish Deirdre, or the soul of goodness in a courtesan; from the subtlety of a Lucrezia Borgia to the proud singleness of a Mariamne; from the virago-venom of an Elinor to the sensitive simplicity of a country-girl, or the wrong-headedness of a little princess whose instincts have been perverted by frustration—;Michael Field has greatly enriched the world's knowledge of womanhood.

She did not set out to do that, of course. Her sanity is evident once more in the moderation with which she held her feminist sympathies, despite the clamour of the time

and the provocation she received from masculine mishandling of her work. Herein too she had removed herself from "Time's harsh drill," having too great a reverence for her art to use it for the purposes of propaganda. That fact leads us again to her sonnet and the light it throws upon herself. For in studying her work one sees that she fulfilled completely her own conception of the poet—;as an artist withdrawn from the common struggle to wrestle with a fiercer power, and subdue it to a shape of recognizable beauty.

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Note.—;The volumes containing *Borgia*, *Queen Mariamne*, *The Tragedy of Pardon*, and *The*

Accuser are now controlled by the Poetry Bookshop.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MICHAEL FIELD ***

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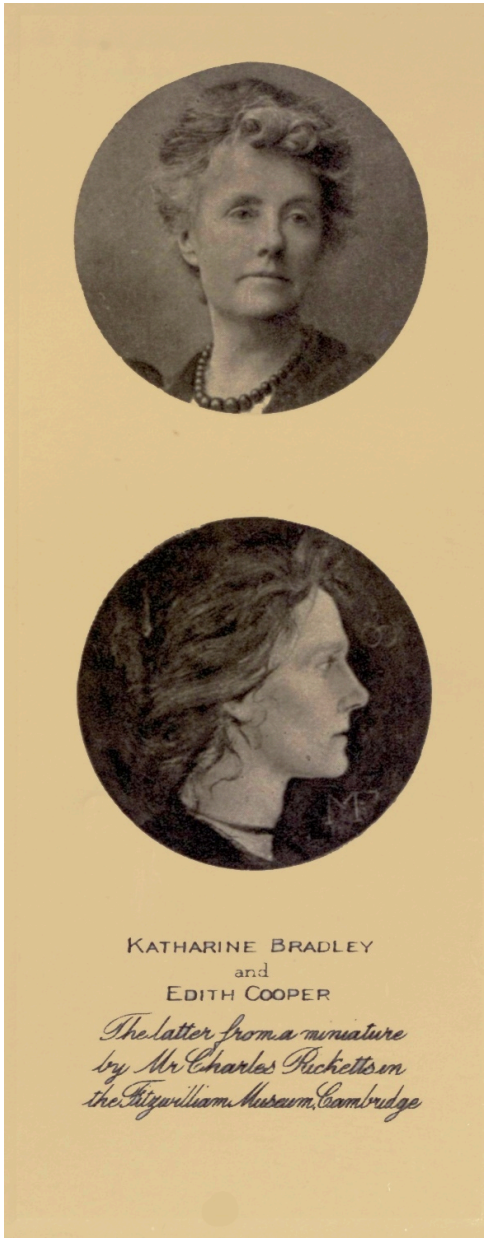
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